

# The Ten Commandments and the Tablets in Shi‘i and Sunni *Tafsir* Literature: A Comparative Perspective

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Among Western scholarship, the Shi‘i view of the Biblical Decalogue and its relationship with the tablets have received scant attention. Most scholars have focused on the Sunni view of the Decalogue and the tablets mentioned in the Qur’an.<sup>1</sup> This paper will initially discuss the presence of the Decalogue in the Qur’an. It will also compare and contrast the views of Sunni and Shi‘i commentators regarding the tablets in the Qur’an and will argue that the ambiguous Qur’anic terminology regarding the contents of the tablets provided Shi‘i commentators with hermeneutical tools to extend their possible ramifications. Using the Qur’anic terms *maw’ida* (admonition) and *tafsil* (exposition) and focusing on the words “of all things” in verse 7:145, many Shi‘i exegetes claimed that the tablets were an important component of the divine-inspired knowledge reportedly located in the Imam. This interpretation enabled them to increase the status and authority of the Imams.

As far as the Decalogue is concerned, the Qur’an does not cite details of any of the Commandments. In some verses, the Qur’an offers a general list of precepts and prohibitions that parallels the Decalogue. Even here, they are not enumerated or detailed in a systematic way. The list of ethical precepts, which appears in verses 17:22-39, is abbreviated in 6:151-3. Verses 17:22-39 state:

“Do not set up not another god with God;  
be good to your parents;  
give the kinsman his right;

and the needy wayfarer; and do not squander;  
slay not your children for fear of poverty;  
do not approach fornication;  
slay not the soul that God has forbidden unless it is right for you to do so;  
do not approach the property of the orphan except in a fair manner;  
give in full when you measure;  
pursue not what you have no knowledge of;  
do not walk on the earth in an arrogant manner.”

Although the Qur’an makes reference to the Commandments revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, it does not contain a verse that enumerates all the Commandments.<sup>2</sup> As Sebastian Gunther has recently shown, even the medieval Muslim exegetes did not establish a link between the Biblical Decalogue and any particular Qur’anic passage.<sup>3</sup> Nor did they establish a connection between verse 2:83-4 (which bears some resemblance to the Decalogue) and the Ten Commandments.<sup>4</sup>

There are traditions which, as William Brinner has shown, contain elements that parallel the Ten Commandments. However, even here, they differ from the Ten Commandments cited in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>5</sup> In some popular Muslim literature known as the *Qisas al-Anbiya* (stories of the Prophets), the Ten Commandments that are cited appear to approximate the Hebrew Decalogue.<sup>6</sup> Sebastian Gunther has argued that the exegetical tradition prior to the classical commentaries and some historical sources do establish a link between Ten Commandments and the Qur’an.<sup>7</sup>

For example, Abu Ishaq al-Tha‘labi (d. 1035), a man of letters and an exegete, states in his *Qisas al-Anbiya*’ that the Qur’an contains the Decalogue itself. He locates the Commandments in 17:23-17:39.<sup>8</sup> For him, the Qur’an does not just refer or allude to the Commandments, it actually contains them.<sup>9</sup> He also states that the Ten Commandments were revealed to Muhammad.<sup>10</sup> Others like al-Kisa’i (n.d.), the author of *Qisas al-Anbiya*’, states that the Commandments are included in the Qur’an in their entirety and that they are binding on all Muslims.<sup>11</sup> Sebastian Gunther has also argued that the *hadith* literature contains a strong presence of an Islamic equivalent of the Biblical Decalogue.<sup>12</sup> However, he does not speculate why the Qur’anic commentators did not cite or expound on this connection in their exegesis.

### **The Tablets in the Exegetical Literature**

Among the scriptures revealed to previous Prophets, verse 7:145 mentions the tablets that God gave to Moses. The term *lawh* (tablet) occurs five times in the Qur’an. In 54:13, Noah’s ark is called *lawh*. The second meaning of *lawh* is that of writing material. It is in this sense that the Qur’an refers to the tablets given to Moses. *Lawh* in the Qur’an is also used to refer to a tablet kept in heaven, which, in 85:22, is called *al-lawh al-mahfuz*, the preserved tablet.

In its exposition of the tablets that were given to Moses, the Qur’an states: “And we wrote for him (Moses) on the tablets of everything an admonition and exposition for all things and said: ‘Take hold of these with firmness and enjoin your people to hold fast of the best precepts, soon I will show you the dwelling of the corrupt ones.’” (7:145). In this verse, the Qur’an alludes to the contents of the tablets in very general terms. It does

not mention how many tablets were given to Moses, nor does it provide a detailed description of what their contents were.

When discussing the tablets, post-Qur'anic Sunni exegetical literature is more interested in describing the precious stones from which the tablets were made rather focusing on the contents of the tablets.<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, many Sunni exegetes speculated on the color and number of tablets given to Moses.<sup>14</sup> The Mu'tazili exegete, Mahmud b. 'Umar al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), for example, admits that there is much speculation among the commentators on the number, length, and even the contents of the tablets.<sup>15</sup>

The general usage of the terms admonishment and exposition in verse 7:145 led the exegetes to speculate on what they meant. Many commentators state that the tablets contained a legal code, and that they were connected to the application of Jewish law. For example, Zamakhshari states that the tablets included all the legal and ethical precepts that the Israelites needed,<sup>16</sup> a view that is shared in a report narrated by Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923) in his *Tafsir*.<sup>17</sup> The view that the contents of the tablets were interwoven with the Jewish legal code is also advanced by the famous eighth-century traditionist Mujahid b. Jabr al-Makki (d. 722). He is quoted by both Tabari and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 1505) as stating that the tablets contained what the followers of Moses were required to perform and refrain from.<sup>18</sup> Among these early Sunni exegetes there is a paucity of a substantive discourse on the contents and ramifications of the tablets. Most of them claim that the tablets provided the basis of Jewish law.

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210) speculates that the Qur'anic usage of the term "admonishment" in 7:145 refers to exhortations that would lead the Israelites to obey

God and keep them from disobeying Him. The term also includes the God's promises and threats. He further states that the Qur'anic term "detailed exposition", on the other hand, refers to what is legally prescribed and prohibited.<sup>19</sup> Most of the early Sunni exegetes have very little to say on the contents of the tablets. They focus on the terms admonishment and exposition and claim that these refer to the revelation of God's laws and general exhortation towards the establishment of a just social order.

Suyuti has preserved a *hadith* transmitted by a reported Jewish convert, Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 728 or 732). Unlike other reports, this tradition provides some details regarding the contents of the tablets. The tradition states that the tablets contain details of God's conversation with Moses. According to this *hadith*, God tells Moses not to associate anyone with Him, otherwise He would get angry. God's anger, Moses is reminded, leads to His curse, which will reach the fourth generation of the descendants of Moses. God also tells Moses not to swear falsely in His name, to obey His parents, to observe the Sabbath, not to commit adultery, not to steal, not to look favorably at God's enemies, or fornicate with his neighbor's wife etc.<sup>20</sup> Even though many of these ethical axioms are to be found both in the Ten Commandments and the Qur'an, there is no mention of this connection in Munabbih's report.

Zamakhshari quotes Muqatil b. Sulayman al-Balkhi (d. 767), another *hadith* transmitter, as stating that the *alwah* contain the following, which parallel, to some degree, the Decalogue. "I am the one Lord, the most Merciful, Compassionate, do not associate with Me, do not sever ties, do not swear falsely in My name, do not kill or fornicate, do not disrespect your parents."<sup>21</sup> Again, the fact that these approximate the Ten Commandments is not even alluded to by Zamakhshari. The tradition is stated

without drawing parallels to similar statements found in the Qur'an. Furthermore, in these traditions, it is the ethical rather than legal tone of the tablets that is emphasized.

Suyuti's work contains other traditions that also speculate on the contents of the tablets.<sup>22</sup> Many of these resonate, broadly, with the contents of the Ten Commandments.<sup>23</sup> He also cites a wide array of reports on the contents of the tablets. Some of the traditions, reportedly preserved in the tablets, pertain to the conversation between God and Moses and are clearly aimed at the Jewish community. The traditions suggest that when he received the *alwah*, Moses was not sure who they referred to since many of them magnified and praised an unspecified community that would appear in the future. In a lengthy report from Qatada b. Di'ama al-Sadusi (d. 735), Moses is reported as telling his Lord that he sees in the tablets a community that is the last to be created and the first to enter heaven, so "make this my *umma*." God responds, "This is the community of Ahmad."<sup>24</sup> Other reports are also cited to show that Muhammad's community is favored by God, and is mentioned in the *alwah*.<sup>25</sup> In these traditions, Moses repeatedly asks God to make this favored *umma* "my community." The response is invariably, "This is the community of Ahmad."<sup>26</sup>

This lengthy report from Qatada is absent in the earlier *tafsir* (exegetical) works. The tradition suggests that the tablets given to Moses contain details regarding the characteristics of Muhammad's community and God's special favors on his people. The tradition is polemical since it states that it is Muhammad's *umma* rather than the Jewish community that is favored by God. Thus, despite Moses' repeated pleas to make "my community" the beneficiary of God's favors, it is Muhammad's community that will

receive them. In a sense, the *hadith* indicates that the Jewish community had lost its special status and elevated position to the Muslim *umma*.

Some Sunni commentators also speculate on the relationship between the tablets and the Torah. According to some traditions, the tablets that God gave to Moses contained both the Ten Commandments and the entire Torah, here identified as the Pentateuch.<sup>27</sup> Another exegete, Imad al-Din Isma‘il ibn Kathir (d. 1373), states that it is believed that the Torah was included in the tablets and has all the information regarding the *halal* and *haram*,<sup>28</sup> whereas ‘Abdallah ibn ‘Abbas (d. 686-7) states that the tablets refer to the Torah.<sup>29</sup> In his discourse on the verse, Suyuti often switches between the tablets and the Torah as if he is using the terms interchangeably.<sup>30</sup> The relationship between the Torah and the tablets was unclear and subject to much speculation.

Other exegetes distinguish between the tablets and the Torah. Ibn Kathir states that it is said (*qila*) that the tablets were given to Moses before the Torah. After citing different reports on the topic, Ibn Kathir seems to suggest that in reality, the truth is unknown. He cites a common Muslim statement when the issue is perplexing, “God knows best.”<sup>31</sup> Even here, the tablets are not mentioned in the context of or in relation to the Ten Commandments.

Sunni exegetes were clearly speculating on a number of issues regarding the *alwah*. As we have seen, they were unclear on the substance from which the tablets were made, their color, the contents and their relationship with the Torah. The commentators were also unclear regarding the number of tablets that Moses received. Zamakhshari states that there is a dispute on the numbers of tablets that God gave to Moses.<sup>32</sup> When Moses broke the tablets, six of the seven tablets were taken back, only one of them

remained with him. This one contained details of all things, general guidance and *rahma* (God's mercy).<sup>33</sup>

The Torah was given in seven tablets, says ibn 'Abbas. Moses threw and broke them when he was angry so six of them were taken back by God, only one remained with Moses.<sup>34</sup> Ibn 'Abbas also states that God had written on the tablets exhortation, particulars of all things, guidance, and mercy. When Moses threw them down, God recalled six of the seven parts.<sup>35</sup> A report reported from Ibn 'Abbas cited by Suyuti identifies this as the sixth tablet.<sup>36</sup> However, not all reports agree that there were seven tablets. Some suggest that there were nine tablets, seven remained with Moses after he broke them.<sup>37</sup> Yet another report indicates that Moses was given six tablets, only four remained with him.<sup>38</sup> The tablet that remained with Moses has guidance and mercy (7:154) according to one report.<sup>39</sup>

### **Shi'i Exegetical Literature in the Pre-Buyid Era**

The preceding discussion indicates that Sunni exegetes were concerned primarily with discussing the composition and number of tablets. They also speculated on what happened to them after they were broken. Very few exegetes speculated on the contents of the tablets. Before discussing the Shi'i view on the tablets, it is important to understand some salient characteristics of the early Shi'i exegetical literature. In all probability, these features were important in determining how the early Shi'i exegetes viewed the tablets.

In the pre-Buyid era (955 –1055), Shi'i exegetes like 'Ali b. Ibrahim al-Qummi (d. 919), Muhammad b. Mas'ud al-'Ayyashi (d. 932), and Furat b. Furat b. Ibrahim (n.d.) relied primarily on *al-dalil al-sam'i*, scriptural and traditional proofs, in their



commentary on the Qur'an. These exegetes sought to prove their distinctive Shi'i beliefs with Qur'anic quotations, ignoring, in the process, the context in which the verses appeared, and not giving proper consideration to the historical circumstances under which they may have been revealed. Frequently, quotations from the Qur'an were supplemented with traditions transmitted from the Prophet and Imams. Thus, early Shi'i exegesis can be classified as *al-tafsir bi'l ma'thur*, interpretation based on traditions.

The commentators used the scripture and traditions to vindicate key Shi'i beliefs regarding the infallibility, appointment and authority of, and the need for the Imams. They also used these sources to justify the existence of an Imam believed to be in occultation. Such interpretations are evident in al-Qummi's *tafsir*. For example, in his commentary on verse 7:56 "Do not corrupt the earth after it has been set in order and call on Him based on fear and longing for the mercy of God, He is close to those who do good" al-Qummi states that the term "set in order" in the verse refers to the Prophet and the Commander of the faithful ('Ali) while corrupting the earth means abandoning 'Ali and his progeny, the Imams. Qummi does not provide any proof for or source of the views he enunciates.<sup>40</sup>

Many of the interpretations of the early Shi'i exegetes are also polemical in nature, refuting, in the process, Sunni beliefs and even belittling the companions of the Prophet. Thus, for example, according to al-'Ayyashi, the seven gates of hell that are mentioned in verse 15:44 are meant to serve as the point of entry for the seven worst enemies of the Shi'is. These are the first three Caliphs and other Umayyad and 'Abbasid leaders.<sup>41</sup>

It should also be noted that, in their interpretation of traditions, these exegetes rarely employ reason or other rational tools. Unlike later commentators, they do not discuss the lexical meaning of certain terms or variant meanings of the verses they discuss. Furthermore, in these commentaries, the transmitters of the *ahadith* – the *rijal* – are not scrutinized nor is the authenticity of the traditions cited questioned. That the pre-Buyid exegetes relied primarily on traditions rather than reason can be seen from some traditions cited by al-‘Ayyashi. He cites statements from the Imams against interpreting the Qur’an based on reason (*tafsir bi’l-ra’y*) and states that only the Imams can interpret the Qur’an authentically.<sup>42</sup>

When the Buyids came to power in 955, they patronized Shi‘i scholars who were now more free to articulate their distinctive beliefs in public. During this period, some of these scholars questioned the reliability of that part of *al-dalil al-sam‘i* which was based on traditions, because apparently fabricated traditions and unauthentic *isnads* (chains of transmission) had surfaced.<sup>43</sup> Scholars like Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Mufid (d. 1022), ‘Ali b. al-Husayn al-Murtada (d. 1044) and Muhammad Ja‘far Tusi (d. 1067) introduced elements of rational thinking in Shi‘i theology. This tendency toward rationalism coexisted with rather than replaced traditionalism.

The transition to the rational defense of doctrines by Shi‘i scholars was also in response to criticisms leveled against them by the Mu‘tazilites and Ash‘arites. Shi‘i theologians resorted to *al-dalil al-‘aqli* — rational argument (the form of demonstration favored by the speculative theologians) as opposed to an exclusive reliance on scriptural proofs in vindicating important Shi‘i doctrines. During the Buyid period, this transition from traditional-based discourse to one that was anchored on reason was reflected in Shi‘i

*tafsir* too as rationalism entered into the exegetical literature.

Beginning with Tusi, a shift in the attitude of Shi'i exegetes becomes evident. Although he does not neglect traditions, Tusi's analysis of Qur'anic verses is along the lines of classical Sunni exegesis. Thus, he incorporates a discussion on variant readings (*qira'at*) of a given verse, a lexical discussion of difficult or rare words or expressions (*lugha*), issue of syntax inherent in the verse and a discussion of the content (*ma'ni*) of the verse under consideration. In addition, Tusi occasionally discusses other aspects, such as the circumstances that brought about the revelation of certain verses (*asbab al-nuzul*), traditions in praise of various *suras* and verses, etc.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Tablets in Shi'i Exegetical Literature**

Using the traditional approach outlined above, Shi'i exegetes writing in the pre-Buyid era relied primarily on traditions reported from the Imams in their understanding of the tablets and their contents. Since the Qur'an uses terms like *maw'ida* (exhortation) and *tafsil* (exposition) in verse 7:145 without discussing or explaining them, Shi'i exegetes were able to speculate on the possible ramifications of the tablets and who their true recipients were.

The early Shi'i exegetes went beyond the Sunni discourse on the tablets. Focusing on the words "of all things," pre-Buyid Shi'i exegetes claimed that the tablets were an essential part of the divine-inspired knowledge reportedly located in the Imam. Hence, Shi'i commentators linked the tablets with the Imams rather than with Moses. It is in this context that we need to understand the Shi'i concept of the *jafr*. In Shi'i *hadith* literature, *jafr* is described as a pot made of cow-hide. It contains the knowledge of the Prophets,

their legatees, and the learned ones among the Israelites. There are two types of *jafr* – white and red. The white *jafr* is said to contain the Psalms of David, the Torah of Moses, the Gospel of Jesus, the scrolls of Abraham and all knowledge of the religiously lawful and unlawful (*halal* and *haram*). It is this white *jafr* that is also believed to include the tablets given to Moses. The red *jafr*, on the other hand, has the weapons of the Prophets and will be opened by the twelfth Shi‘i messianic Imam, the Mahdi (b. 870), when he reappears at the end of time to establish justice and equality on earth.

Shi‘i *hadith* literature reports different traditions on how the *jafr* was obtained by the Prophet. According to one tradition, it is reported that when Muhammad was informed by God that his death was imminent, the Prophet asked Him to “fulfill His promise.” God replied by commanding him to climb the Mountain of Uhud along with ‘Ali, the first Shi‘i Imam, and, facing away from the direction of prayer, make the mountain aware of his presence. He was then instructed to select a certain young calf or lamb (*jafrah*, implying the derivation of *jafr*) with prominent horns and blood spouting from its veins, and have ‘Ali slaughter it and turn its skin inside out; the skin would be found to be already tanned. At this point, so the Prophet was told, the spirit (*ruh*) and Gabriel would come with heavenly pen and ink (its color a luminous green), and, as the Prophet dictated, ‘Ali was to record the revelation. Both the skin and the ink are indestructible. Even though the scroll becomes more fresh and new every time it is unrolled, no one is allowed to view it except the Imams.<sup>45</sup>

The information inscribed by ‘Ali on the *jafr* included the description of “every age and what shall occur therein,” “all that has been and shall be until the day of resurrection.” It will also include “things the interpretation (*ta’wil*) of which is known

only to God and ‘those firmly rooted in knowledge’” (Q 3:7), and the identity of “those among his progeny who shall become the friends (*awliya*) of God continuously until the last day.”<sup>46</sup> The *jafr* contains, in addition, news of “every enemy they (the Imams) shall have in every epoch,” and “every event that shall overtake both ‘Ali and his descendants, the Imams.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Transmission of the *Jafr***

What is the link between the tablets and the *jafr* and how were they transmitted to the Imams? Al-‘Ayyashi cites a lengthy report from Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 765), the sixth Shi‘i Imam. The tradition cites verse 7:145 and states that the tablets that were given to Moses contained an exposition of all things that have occurred and will occur to the end of time. When God gave Moses the tablets, He asked him to store them in a certain mountain in Yemen. When Moses reached the mountain, it split open. He then placed the tablets, which had been properly wrapped, in the open mountain. The mountain then closed up. The tradition goes on to state that the tablets remained in the mountain until the time of Muhammad.

In Muhammad’s time, a delegation from Yemen that was traveling to meet the Prophet passed by the mountain. When they reached the mountain, it split open and the tablets appeared, covered just as Moses had left them. The Yemenis took the tablets. When it was in their hands, God caused fear and awe to enter into their hearts so that they would not look at its contents. They journeyed until they reached Medina to meet the Prophet. In the meantime, God sent Gabriel to the Prophet to inform him of the coming of the Yemenis and to acquaint him of what had happened to them. When the Yemenis met the Prophet, he asked them as to what they had found on their way to Medina. They asked him, “Who told you of what we

have found?” He said, “My Lord informed me, [what you have] are the tablets of Moses.” At that point, the Yemenis converted to Islam and gave the tablets to Muhammad.

The Prophet read them and found that they were in Hebrew. He then called out to ‘Ali and told him that the tablets contained knowledge of things from the beginning to the end of time. “These are,” Muhammad continues, “the tablets of Moses. My Lord has commanded me to give them to you.” ‘Ali responded that he could not read them as they were in Hebrew.

At that point, the Prophet told him that Gabriel had commanded him to tell ‘Ali to put them under his head that night, and that “when you wake up you will be able to read them.” ‘Ali did as he was told. When he woke up in the morning, God had taught him everything that the tablets contained.<sup>48</sup> The Prophet then asked him to copy it. He copied it on a sheep’s skin, and this is the *jafr*. The report stresses that it contains knowledge of all things from the beginning to the end of time. Al-Sadiq continues in the tradition, “We (the Imams) have the tablets, we have the rod of Moses, the Prophet has bequeathed us (the Imams) with it.”<sup>49</sup>

Sayyid Hashim al-Bahrani (d. 1696 or 1697), another Shi‘i exegete, cites the same report that al-‘Ayyashi does. In addition, he cites other traditions whose contents differ from the tradition cited by al-‘Ayyashi although the final outcome is similar, i.e., the tablets are finally given to the Imams. In another tradition cited by al-Bahrani, ‘Ali states that when Moses became angry, he broke some of the tablets, some he did not break and others were taken back by God. Joshua, who succeeded Moses, transmitted the tablets [and it continued] generation after generation until they reached a group in Yemen who had heard of Muhammad.

When they heard of his preaching, they decided to visit him in Medina. Gabriel informed the Prophet of their arrival. When the Yemenis arrived to see the Prophet, he

informed them their names and what they had in their possession. The Yemenis accepted Islam and the contents of the tablets were placed at ‘Ali’s head. He memorized them.<sup>50</sup>

It is important to comprehend the importance of the tablets to the Shi‘i understanding of the authority and the knowledge of the Imams. Based on the words “of all things,” the tradition reported by al-‘Ayyashi states that the information contained in the tablets would empower the Imams with the ability to know all the events that occurred from the beginning to the end of time. It would also enable him to know what is legally prescribed and prohibited. It is because of this empowerment that ‘Ali is reported to have told his companions, “Ask me what will happen to the day of resurrection.”<sup>51</sup>

The tradition also suggests that the tablets were, in reality, meant for the Imams, who were to be their final custodians. Moses was merely a conduit to deliver the *alwah* to the rightful recipients. Thus, in the final analysis, it was the Imams, not Moses, that the tablets were intended for. The tradition also maintains that God ensured the preservation and deliverance of the tablets to its ultimate destination suggesting, thereby, the working of the divine agency in the transmission of the tablets to the Imams. It is also to be noted that Shi‘i exegesis of verse 7:145 focuses on the terms “of all things.” In contrast, Sunni commentators on the same verse stress “admonishment” and “exposition.” By emphasizing “of all things”, pre-Buyid Shi‘i commentators were able to link the tablets to the extra-ordinary knowledge reportedly endowed to the Imams.

The tradition also mentions what the tablets contained. Although it does not describe or explain the contents in detail, it stresses that the tablets contain information pertaining to all previous and future events. This information is now available to the Imams whose authority and knowledge would inevitably be enhanced. Sunni exegetes, on

the other hand, interpret the same words in verse 7:145 (“of all things”) as referring to the revelation of the *halakhic* and ethical codes to the Israelites.

In addition, the Shi‘i tradition on the tablets connects the tablets with the *jafr*. ‘Ali copied the tablets and these were transmitted to other Imams in the form of the *jafr*. The *jafr* was obtained by the Prophet for the special use of ‘Ali and his descendants. The Imams could use the *jafr* in different ways. The *jafr* contains news of “every enemy the Imams shall have in every age,” and “every event to overtake both ‘Ali and his descendants, the Imams.”<sup>52</sup> The Imams could use the information in making important decisions. Thus, for example, when accepting the political leadership of the community (caliphate), ‘Ali al-Rida (d. 818), the eighth Shi‘i Imam is quoted as telling the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun (d. 833), “The *jafr* and *jami‘a* indicate the opposite of this.”<sup>53</sup> In essence, the *jafr* enabled the Imam to prophesy that he would not inherit the caliphate from al-Ma’mun. “My son,” says Musa al-Kazim (d. 799), the seventh Imam, “looks along with me into the *jafr*, and no one may look at it except a Prophet or an Imam.”<sup>54</sup>

However, most traditions indicate that the tablets were just one component (albeit a significant one) of the *jafr*, which included other scrolls and forms of knowledge that were available to the Imams. Some traditions also indicate that the *jafr* includes the Torah and the Gospels<sup>55</sup> and all previous scrolls in their possession.<sup>56</sup> Thus, Ja‘far al-Sadiq is reported to have stated, “We have the scrolls of Abraham and the tablets of Moses.”<sup>57</sup>

It should be emphasized that not all Shi‘i exegetes accepted the tradition that connected the tablets with the *jafr*. As I have stated, exegetes writing in the Buyid and post-Buyid period were more critical in accepting traditions. Their exegetical discourses were based on both *al-dalil al-‘aqli* and *al-dalil al-sam‘i*. In his discussion on the tablets,



the famous Shi‘i scholar Muhammad b. al-Hasan (Shaykh) Tusi endorses the Sunni view that they contain the *halal* and *haram*, and adds that the tablets also contain what is morally right and wrong, what is recommended and reprehensible and everything else that is required. He also maintains that the Torah was included in the tablets.<sup>58</sup> More importantly, Tusi quotes Sunni exegetes like al-Jubba‘i (d. 915), Mujahid, and Qatada while ignoring traditions that connect the tablets with the *jafr* and the explanation provided by erstwhile Shi‘i commentators on verse 7:145.

Even in Shi‘i circles there was some confusion on the relationship between the tablets and the Torah. This is confirmed in a tradition cited by Fadl b. al-Hasan al-Tabrisi (d. 1153-4) from ibn ‘Abbas. He states that the *alwah* were, in fact, the Torah. Like the Sunni exegetes and Tusi, Tabrisi speculates on the composition of the tablets rather than on their contents.<sup>59</sup> For Tabrisi, the term “of all things” in the verse refers to the *halal* and *haram* and all commandments and prohibitions. Like Tusi, Tabrisi ignores the tradition that links the tablets with the knowledge of the Imams.

Similarly, the twentieth-century Qur’anic commentator ‘Allama Muhammad Husayn Tabataba‘i (d. 1982) dismisses Shi‘i reports that the tablets were hidden in a mountain in Yemen. He states that such reports are singular (reported by only one reporter) and that they are not supported by conclusive proofs (*qara’in qat‘iyya*).<sup>60</sup> Tabataba‘i also states that the Qur’anic term “of all things” refers to general admonition and exposition, not to the knowledge of everything from the beginning to the end of time. Thus, he rejects the explanation provided by pre-Buyid exegetes. For him, the tablets refer to the Torah and all things necessary for the Israelites to maintain their beliefs and undertake their religious practices.<sup>61</sup> Tabataba‘i also suggests that, in itself, the Torah is

not sufficient to serve the needs of the people. It is because of this that the Qur'an mentions the Torah, tablets, Gospels, and the book separately.<sup>62</sup>

### **The Tablets and the Knowledge of the Imams**

As we have seen, Shi'i *tafsir* connects the *alwah* and the *jafr* with the knowledge of the Imams. This was a significant step for the Shi'is because they could now claim that the Imams were the inheritors of the knowledge of the Prophets. As I have shown elsewhere, different factions within the Muslim community competed to be the heirs of the Prophet during the early period of Islamic history thereby validating their claims to religious and/or political authority. The title "heirs of the Prophet" was an honorific epithet that conferred authority to those who claimed it.<sup>63</sup>

The title was based on a Prophetic tradition "The scholars are heirs of the Prophet." The tradition emphasizes that the Prophet had bequeathed knowledge that was, according to the Shi'is, in the hands of the Imams. It was this factor that empowered the Imams to exercise religious authority over the community. The Shi'is added extra dimensions to vindicate their claims that the Imams were the exclusive and legitimate heirs of the Prophet. Apart from the knowledge of the Prophet, the Shi'is maintained that the Imams had the scrolls and weapons of the Prophet.<sup>64</sup> The Shi'is argued that the weapons would fit the Imams only, thus providing incontrovertible proof as to who were the true heirs of the Prophet. In addition, as they belonged to the family of the Prophet, the *ahl al-bayt* (something that most caliphs and Sunni scholars could not claim), the Shi'i Imams contended that they were the Prophet's heirs based on lineal descent.

The tablets and *jafr* were important components that would enable the Imams to claim to be the true and exclusive Prophetic heirs. Since the tablets contain knowledge of all things the Imams gain knowledge of the future, in particular of their own destiny. There is in this *jafr* “that which causes people to have need of us” (i.e. the necessary knowledge of the law for which people must apply to the Imams) while “we have need of no one.”<sup>65</sup> The tablets, in the Shi‘i theory of epistemology, form an intrinsic part of the Imams’ divinely bestowed knowledge. Due to the weapons and extra knowledge that the Imams have at their disposal, Shi‘i exegetes and theologians could and often did argue that the knowledge of the Imams surpassed that of the Prophets. Thus, al-Sadiq is reported to have claimed, “I know more than what Moses and Khidr ever did.”<sup>66</sup> Even the *jinn*s would visit the Imams to seek answers to their questions.<sup>67</sup>

The tablets are also important in the Shi‘i theory of the Imamate because they could be used in polemics. This is because they help elevate the knowledge of the Imams who were, as mentioned, the rightful recipients of the tablets. Due to the tablets and other scrolls at their disposal, the Imams are aware of all that has been revealed to the angels and the Prophets.<sup>68</sup> It is also believed that they know all languages,<sup>69</sup> and that people’s speech is not hidden from them.<sup>70</sup> Due to the scrolls at their disposal, the Imams can even judge by David’s wisdom<sup>71</sup> and predict the future.<sup>72</sup> The collective knowledge of the Imams distinguishes and raises them above the Sunni caliphs, scholars, and even biblical Prophets.

The fact that, in the tradition cited above, the Yemenis deliver the tablets to the Prophet and are astonished that he knows them and what is in their possession even before they inform him further underscores the polemical nature and importance of the

tablets tradition. It suggests that even Jews are moved by the divine agency that is working to ensure that the *alwah* are delivered to the rightful recipients. This leads to their acceptance of Muhammad's mission and conversion to Islam.

The discussion on the tablets and the *jafr* must be contextualized within the wider framework of the sources of knowledge of the Imams. As heirs of the Prophet, the Imams also inherit the sources of the Prophet's knowledge. According to Shi'i *hadith*, the knowledge of an Imam is derived from diverse sources. His knowledge may be inherited from the previous Imam, or it could be acquired from the scrolls that have been handed down from the previous Imam. It could also be attained through direct contact with an angel. In this sense, the Imam is regarded as *muhaddath*, for it is believed that the Imam hears but does not see an angel.<sup>73</sup> In addition, occult knowledge is transmitted to the Imam by the marking of the heart and the piercing of the eardrum.<sup>74</sup> Some traditions further indicate that the Imam receives celestial inspiration on the night of power (*layl al-qadr*),<sup>75</sup> and that every Thursday night, his spirit ascends in a pilgrimage to the divine throne, where it is filled with all the knowledge the Imam requires.<sup>76</sup>

It should be noted that, even among Shi'i scholars, there were differences regarding the extent and possible ramifications of the knowledge of the Imams. According to some reports, the Imams themselves denied that they possessed extraordinary knowledge.<sup>77</sup> For example, 'Ali b. al-Husayn (Sharif) al-Murtada, a prominent theologian, rejected the view that the knowledge of the Imams exceeded that of the Prophets.<sup>78</sup> His teacher, Shaykh al-Mufid is even reported to have denied that the Imams had knowledge of the unknown<sup>79</sup> or that they knew all languages and events.<sup>80</sup>

## **The Tablets and the Authority of the Imams**

The tablets and other scrolls are also connected to the Shi‘i understanding of religious leadership. This is because they authenticate the Imam’s claims to authority, thereby nullifying rival claims to the Imamate. They also point to where the authentic ‘*ilm* (knowledge) is located for it is only the possessor of the scrolls who has the authoritative divinely inspired knowledge. As a matter of fact, in his book *Bas’air al-Darajat*, the ninth-tenth century traditionist al-Hasan al-Saffar (d. 902) cites one hundred traditions on the Imams’ knowledge being interwoven with the scrolls to underscore the connection between the authority of the Imam and the possession of scrolls.

The tablets, Torah, *jafr*, and other genres of knowledge are important in Shi‘i exegesis as they are connected to the Shi‘i concept of charismatic authority. The Shi‘i view of charismatic authority stipulates that along with knowledge, the authority of an Imam is substantiated by the scrolls and weapons of the Prophet that he reportedly inherited. Due to the principle of hereditary charisma that is intrinsic to the Shi‘i concept of authority, Shi‘is maintain that the divinely bestowed knowledge (‘*ilm*) of an Imam is transmitted in a concatenated chain to all subsequent Imams.<sup>81</sup> Thus, although the authority of an Imam can, theoretically, be inherited by any one of a number of his sons, it is the belief in the possession of the scrolls and divinely inspired knowledge that restricts the authority to a particular individual. The tablets, along with the other scrolls, act as a mitigating factor, ensuring that only the rightful candidate among several contenders for the Imamate can inherit the Imam’s charisma and authority. In this context, we can comprehend the Shi‘i insistence that inherited authority must be complemented by inherited knowledge for it is the latter characteristic that enables the Imam to interpret the divine message authentically.

Furthermore, the possession of the tablets and *jafr* is important in the study of the Shi'i concept of religious authority because, in the absence of any political investiture, this was the only factor that could prove the claim to Imamate when disputes arose regarding the identity of a true successor of an Imam. The scrolls and the concomitant knowledge becomes the source of authority and the only feasible means to legitimize any claim to authority.

Shi'i understanding of sacred history further stipulates that this *'ilm* and the concomitant authority be fully retained in a particular line of the Prophet's family, more specifically among the *ahl al-bayt*. It is therefore related from Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 731-2 or 737), the fifth Imam, that *'ilm* should not be sought from the east or the west, rather, it was to be acquired from the *ahl al-bayt* only.<sup>82</sup> Stated differently, it was the source rather than the substance of the knowledge that was important. Only knowledge derived from the *ahl al-bayt* was valid since it was inherited from the Prophets.

## **Conclusion**

Unlike the Sunnis, pre-Buyid Shi'i exegetes focus on the words "of all things" rather than on "admonishment" and "exposition." This is not to say that the latter terms are not mentioned, rather, the emphasis is on "of all things" because these could be used to enhance the authority and knowledge of the Imams. The function of the tablets and *jafr* was testimonial, that is, to vindicate and acknowledge the knowledge of the imam. Amidst competing factions that sought legitimacy by claiming to be "orthodox," traditions on the tablets and *jafr* were deployed to make an important contribution in formulating orthodox Shi'i beliefs and practices, positing, in the process, a "normative" view of Shi'ism.

In the process of disputation with the Sunni and non-Muslim other, pre-Buyid Shi'is used the tablets traditions, along with other statements from the Imams, to help establish and assert the correct and therefore "saved" authority, for consolidation (defense of beliefs) and the creation of an "orthodox" institution. Without the assertion and recognition of the "saved authority" and "sacred sources", the community could not possibly be saved.

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<sup>1</sup> See Sebastian Gunther, "O People of the Scripture! Come to a Word Common to You and Us (Q. 3:64): The Ten Commandments and the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 9,1 (2007); William Brinner, "An Islamic Decalogue," in *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions*, ed. W. Brinner and S. Ricks (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Sebastian Gunther, "O People of the Scripture," p. 29-30. Verse 2:83 refers to God's Covenant with the children of Israel and to some of the Commandments.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 32

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Brinner, "Islamic," pp. 67-69.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> Sebastian Gunther, "O People of the Scripture," p. 32-3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, a scholar of Prophetic traditions and a mystic also promotes the idea of an intimate connection between the Biblical Decalogue and the text of the Qur'an. Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 38-9.

<sup>13</sup> Sebastian Gunther, "O People of the Scripture," p. 31. See also Keith Lewinstein, art. "Commandments," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., vol. 1, pp. 365-7.

<sup>14</sup> Camilla Adang, art. "Torah," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, vol. 5, pp. 300-311; p. 301. Isma'il ibn Kathir, *Tafsir* (4 vols. Beirut: Dar al-Mufid, n.d.), vol. 2, p. 249; Jalal al-Din Suyuti, *al-Durr al-Manthur fi Tafsir bi'l-Ma'thur* (8 vols. Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-'Arabi, 2001), vol. 3, pp. 495-6.

<sup>15</sup> Mahmud b. 'Umar al-Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshaf 'an Haqa'iq al-Ghawamiz al-Tanzil* (4 vols. Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Azali, 1987), vol. 1, p. 157; see also Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* (30 vols. Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1992), vol. 9, p. 46; Muhammad al-Razi Fakhr al-Din, *Tafsir al-Fakhr al-Razi*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (32 vols. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1985), vol. 14 pp. 246-7.

<sup>16</sup> al-Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshaf*, vol. 2, p. 158.

<sup>17</sup> al-Tabari, *Jami'*, vol. 9, pp. 39-40.



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- <sup>18</sup> Suyuti, *al-Durr*, vol. 3, p. 496. See also al-Tabari, *Jami`*, vol. 9, p. 40; al-Razi, *Tafsir*, vol. 14, p. 247.
- <sup>19</sup> al-Razi, *Tafsir*, vol. 14, p. 247. See also Sebastian Gunther, "O People of the Scripture," pp. 31-2.
- <sup>20</sup> Suyuti, *al-Durr*, vol. 3, p. 497. See also al-Tabari, *Jami`*, vol. 9, p. 40.
- <sup>21</sup> al-Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshaf*, vol. 2, p. 158.
- <sup>22</sup> Suyuti, *al-Durr*, vol. 3, pp. 497-8.
- <sup>23</sup> See, for example, a Prophetic report cited by Suyuti narrated by Jabir b. `Abd Allah, *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 498.
- <sup>24</sup> On this tradition, see al-Tabari, *Jami`*, vol. 9, p. 45; Suyuti, *Durr*, vol. 3, pp. 498-9.
- <sup>25</sup> Suyuti, *al-Durr*, vol. 3, p. 499.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> Adang, "Torah," pp. 300-1.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, vol. 2, p. 247.
- <sup>29</sup> al-Fadl b. al-Hasan al-Tabrisi, *Majma` al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* (10 vols. Tehran: Dar al-Ma`rifa, 1987), vol. 3, p. 733.
- <sup>30</sup> For example, see Suyuti, *al-Durr*, vol. 3, p. 498.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, vol. 2, p. 247.
- <sup>32</sup> al-Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshaf*, vol. 2, p. 157.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 161 on the different numbers of tablets. See also al-Tabari, *Jami`*, vol. 9, p. 46.
- <sup>34</sup> Suyuti, *al-Durr*, vol. 3, p. 496; Adang, "Torah," 301.
- <sup>35</sup> Brannon Wheeler, *Prophets in the Qur'an: An Introduction to the Qur'an and Muslim Exegesis* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 205.
- <sup>36</sup> Suyuti, *al-Durr*, vol. 3, p. 510.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 511.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 510.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>40</sup> `Ali b. Ibrahim al-Qummi, *Tafsir al-Qummi* (Beirut: Matba'a al-Najaf, 1968), vol. 1, pp. 236.

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- <sup>41</sup> Meir Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami Shi'ism* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999), p. 110.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 61-2.
- <sup>43</sup> Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany: SUNY, 1981), pp. 109-110.
- <sup>44</sup> Meir Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami Shi'ism*, p. 80.
- <sup>45</sup> Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Saffar, *Basa'ir al-Darajat fi Fada'il Al Muhammad* (Qum: Maktabat Ayat Allah al-Mar'ashi), pp. 506-7.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 507.
- <sup>47</sup> See Lynda Clarke, "Early Doctrine of the Shi'ah according to the Shi'i Sources," (Unpublished Thesis, McGill University, 1994), p. 129.
- <sup>48</sup> The view that 'Ali was asked to put it under his head overnight so that he could learn from it is also reported by al-Saffar in *Basa'ir*, p. 140.
- <sup>49</sup> Muhammad b. Mas'ud al-'Ayyashi, *Kitab al-Tafsir* (2 vols. Tehran: al-Maktaba al-'Ilmiyya al-Islamiyya, 1961), vol. 2, p. 28; Sayyid Hashim al-Bahrani, *al-Burhan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* (4 vols. Beirut: Mu'assassa al-Wafa', 1983), vol. 2, p. 36.
- <sup>50</sup> al-Bahrani, *al-Burhan*, vol. 2, pp. 36-37.
- <sup>51</sup> al-Saffar, *Basa'ir*, p. 202.
- <sup>52</sup> Clarke, "Early Doctrine", p. 129.
- <sup>53</sup> D. B. MacDonald, "Djafr," in *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*. eds. H. A. Gibb and J.H. Kramers, pp. 80-81. The *jam'ia* is another scroll the Imams are reported to have possessed.
- <sup>54</sup> Clarke, "Early Doctrine," p. 128.
- <sup>55</sup> al-Saffar, *Basa'ir*, p. 140.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 136.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid. In another tradition, al-Sadiq describes the contents of the *jafr* at his disposal, *ibid.*, p. 150.
- <sup>58</sup> Muhammad b. al-Hasan Tusi, *al-Tibyan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* (10 vols. Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-'Arabi, n.d.), vol. 4, pp. 539-540.
- <sup>59</sup> al-Tabrisi, *Majma'*, vol. 4, p. 733.
- <sup>60</sup> Muhammad al-Husayn ('Allama) Tabataba'i, *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* (20 vols. Qum: Jam'aa al-Mudarrisin, n.d.), vol. 8, p. 261.
- <sup>61</sup> Tabataba'i, *al-Mizan*, vol. 8, p. 245.

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- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., vol. 8, p. 250.
- <sup>63</sup> Liyakat Takim, *The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam* (Albany: SUNY, 2006).
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., chapters one and two.
- <sup>65</sup> Clarke, "Early Doctrine," p. 131.
- <sup>66</sup> Al-Saffar, *Basa'ir*, p. 129. Khidr is the mysterious learned traveler who traveled with Moses. Although Khidr is not mentioned by name, the episode is narrated in chapter 18 of the Qur'an.
- <sup>67</sup> al-Saffar, *Basa'ir*, p. 96; Muhammad b. Ya'qub al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi fi 'Ilm al-Din* (4 vols. Tehran: Daftar Farhang Ahl al-Bayt, n.d.), vol. 2, p. 242.
- <sup>68</sup> Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, vol. 1, p. 375.
- <sup>69</sup> Al-Saffar, *Basa'ir*, p. 333; Muhammad b. Muhammad b. al-Nu'man al-Mufid, *al-Ikhtisas* (Qum: Maktaba al-Zahra, 1982), p. 289. The eleventh Imam, al-Hasan al-'Askari, is believed to have spoken to a person in Turkish. Kulayni, *Kafi*, vol. 2, pp. 40-1. The Imams could even read books written in different languages, al-Saffar, *Basa'ir*, p. 339. See also Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. David Streight (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 93.
- <sup>70</sup> Kulayni, *Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 38.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 247-8.
- <sup>72</sup> Muhammad b. 'Umar Kashshi, *Ikhtiyar Ma'rifa al-Rijal*, ed. al-Mustafawi (Mashad: Danishgahi Mashad, 1969), p. 357, 471.
- <sup>73</sup> Muhammad b. Ibrahim al-Nu'mani, *Kitab al-Ghayba* (Tehran: Maktaba al-Saduq, n.d.), pp. 66-67; Muhammad b. 'Ali b. al-Husayn al-Saduq, *Kamal al-Din Wa Tamam al-Ni'ma* (Qum: Mu'assassa al-Nashr al-Islami, 1985), p. 339; al-Saffar, *Basa'ir*, pp. 369-70.
- <sup>74</sup> Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide*, p. 16.
- <sup>75</sup> al-Saffar, *Basa'ir*, pp. 220-25.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 132.
- <sup>77</sup> Etan Kohlberg, "Imam and Community in the Pre-Ghayba Period," in Sa'id Arjomand (ed.), *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (Albany: SUNY, 1988), p. 27.
- <sup>78</sup> 'Ali b. al-Husayn al-Murtada, *al-Shafi'i fi'l-Imama* (2 vols. Tehran: Mu'assassa al-Sadiq, 1990), vol 1, pp. 40-1, vol. 2 pp. 30-1.
- <sup>79</sup> Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam* (Princeton: Darwin, 1993), pp. 25-6; Meir Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami Shi'ism*, pp. 152-3.

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<sup>80</sup> Muhammad b. Muhammad b. al-Nu'man al-Mufid, *Awa'il al-Maḡalat fi al-Madhahib wa'l Mukhtarāt* (Tabriz: n.p. 1950), p. 77.

<sup>81</sup> See Takim, *The Heirs*, chapters one and two.

<sup>82</sup> Muhammad b. 'Umar Kashshi, *Ikhtiyar Ma'rifa al-Rijal*, 209.