

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Gradational Nature of the Rank of Imamate According to the Shi'a and Sunni Based on Verse 253 of Surah *al-Baqarah*

Davud Saemi^{1*} , Zahra Sepehri² 

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Studies Education, Farhangian University, Tehran, Iran.
2. Level 4 Seminary Student, Qasim ibn al-Hasan (AS) Seminary, Specialization in Comparative Exegesis, Tehran, Iran.

Correspondence:

Davud Saemi

Email: da.saemi@quran.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

The issue of Imamate is one of the important theological topics discussed among Shi'a and Sunni exegetes and theologians, and numerous Qur'anic verses and narrations have been examined in this regard. This article, using a descriptive analytical method, attempts to study the various views of both groups based on library sources. The aim of this article is to examine the gradational nature of the rank of Imamate by relying on the gradational nature of Prophethood, drawing upon verse 253 of Surah al-Baqarah; therefore, examining the specific instances of superiority within the rank of Imamate is not the focus of this article. The findings indicate that the definitions offered by Sunni scholars and exegetes differ completely from those of Imami exegetes. Some Sunni scholars consider Imamate to be equivalent to Prophethood. Therefore, discussion about the gradational nature of Imamate, from their point of view, does not arise. However, the Imami School believes that the rank of Imamate is higher than that of Prophethood, and by establishing the gradational nature of Prophethood, the gradational nature of Imamate is also confirmed.

KEYWORDS

Gradational Nature of Imamate, Rank of Prophethood, Verse 253 of Surah al-Baqarah, Exegetes of Both Schools.



Introduction

Imamate is one of the key issues in Islam, which since the earliest period of Islamic history has had many supporters and opponents, and has led to the writing of numerous books and articles. The importance and necessity of this issue lies in the fact that by establishing the gradational nature of Prophethood and affirming the lofty status of the Noble Prophet of Islam, the exaltedness of the rank of Imamate and its obligatory obedience in Islam becomes even more firmly demonstrated.

The present study aims to answer one of the important questions such as:

- What are the views of exegetes from both schools regarding the gradational nature of the rank of Imamate based on *al-Baqarah*: 253?

In order to answer this question, other related questions must also be addressed, such as:

- What are the views of Shi'a and Sunni exegetes regarding the gradational nature of the ranks of the prophets and the superiority of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)?

- What do Shi'a and Sunni exegetes say about the superiority of Imamate over Prophethood?

- According to Shi'a belief, are the Imams superior to other prophets?

Some exegetes have authored works and discussed the gradational nature of Prophethood; for example, Allameh Javadi Amoli in Tafsir Tasnim under verse 253 of Surah *al-Baqarah*, and Qadrddan Maleki in the seventh and eighth sections of his book on Imamate, titled "The Superiority of Imamate over Prophethood" and "The Superiority of the Shi'a Imams over the Prophets." Other related articles have also been written, such as "A Comparison between Imam and Prophet from the View of Imam *Riḍā* (AS)" by Hasan Sadeqi, and "Verse 124 of Surah *al-Baqarah* and the Reality of Imamate from the View of Shi'a

Exegetes" by Khadijeh Hosseinzadeh Barde'i, among others. However, based on the research conducted, no article or book specifically addressing the gradational nature of the rank of Imamate has been found; therefore, this study should be considered a novel investigation.

1. Conceptual Analysis of the Term "Imamate"

1.1. Imamate in Lexicography

The word *Imam* comes from the root (*A M M*). *Imam* refers to someone whose words and actions are followed, or to a book or object, whether it is right or wrong. Its plural is *A'immaḥ* (Imams). In the verse "The Day We will call every people with their Imam," (*al-Isrā'*: 71) it means the one they used to follow; some have said it refers to their book (Rāghib Iṣfahānī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 87).

Ibn Manẓūr and *Azharī* define *Imam* as: "Anyone whom a group follows, whether they are on the straight path or misguided." (*Ibn Manẓūr*, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 12, 24; *Azharī*, 1991 AD/1421 AH: 15, 457)

Jawharī states: "Imam is one who is followed." (*Jawharī*, 1956 AD/1376 AH: 5, 1866)

1.2. Imamate in Shi'a and Sunni Terminology

1.2.1. Imamate in Shi'a Terminology

The views of Shi'a Qur'anic scholar regarding the term *Imam* can be divided into three groups:

- 1) **Leadership over all people and prophets:** Some scholars, based on the unrestricted use of "Imam" and "*al-Nās*," consider Prophet Abraham as the leader of all the righteous, prophets, and saints.

- 2) **Governance and administration of the community:** This view has ancient roots in Shi'a exegesis and has been supported by major Shi'a exegetes.

3) Leadership in the guidance of the divine command: Initiated by Allamah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, who, by using other Qur'anic verses, interprets Imamate as leadership through "God's command," which is the metaphysical aspect of the world created by the divine word "*Kun*" (Be). The Imam guides hearts through a direct, existential guidance that ensures reaching the goal (Najarzadegan, 2021 AD/1400 SH: 118-128).

1.2.2. Imamate in Sunni Terminology

Sunni views regarding the term *Imamate* may be divided into two groups: "Some interpret *Imam* as a leader in religious practice and moral conduct, particularly referring to Abraham and others interpret it to mean Prophet."

1) Leadership in religious practice and conduct: "Indeed, I will make you an Imam for the people" means: "It was a reward for what he (Abraham) had done, for he upheld God's commands and avoided prohibitions, so God made him a model and leader for humanity, an Imam who is followed and emulated." (Ṭabarānī, 2008: 1, 238; Ibn Kathīr, 1998 AD/1419 AH: 1, 284)

2) Prophet: The Shi'a believes that a person does not become an Imam except through divine designation (*Naṣṣ*), and they rely on verse 124 of Surah *al-Baqarah*: "Indeed, I will make you an Imam for the people." Thus, they argue that the Almighty God has stated that Imamate occurs through explicit divine appointment, similar to God's statement: "I will place a vicegerent on the earth." Therefore, the Shi'a hold that the office of vicegerency is achieved only through *Naṣṣ*. But this view is weak, because, as we have previously explained, Imamate here means Prophethood (Fakhr Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 4, 37; Najarzadegan, 2021 AD/1400 SH: 129-132).

1.3. Evaluation of the Views of the Two Schools

Imamate is the leadership of obligatory obedience (delegated authority over religion), and it must be interpreted in a way that carries the following characteristics:

1. It must be compatible with the divine appointment of Imamate that occurred after the Prophethood and Messengership of Prophet Abraham.
2. It must be consistent with the universal nature of Imamate, "For all people."
3. It must go beyond the scope of Prophethood, Messengership, and their requisites (Najarzadegan, 2021 AD/1400 SH: 154).

With the multiple definitions offered by the exegetes, it seems that Imamate means possessing a rank of obligatory obedience, because when someone becomes an Imam, he reaches the rank of obligatory obedience, one whose obedience is divinely mandated. This is a new rank.

The one who is obligatory obedience issues rulings from God directly, not merely transmitting divine statements. A prophet, before reaching Imamate, transmits God's message. Therefore, this new authority is delegated by God to the Imam; when he attains Imamate, the affairs of the people are entrusted to him so that he himself may issue authoritative rulings. Thus, when Abraham became an Imam, he could issue rulings independently, and his word was a binding proof in religion.

Based on this analysis, a prophet has two domains in which obedience to him is obligatory:

1. Political authority, governance, and judgment;
2. Explanation of revelation and independent legislation.

The Prophet, in the time of his Prophethood, received revelation and simultaneously held the position of Imam. In these two independent

domains, politics and sacred law, people were obligated to obey him (Najarzadegan, 2021 AD/1400 SH: 155-163)

Considering the definitions offered by lexicographers and the exegetes of both schools, including the view presented by Najarzadegan in the book "Imamate," there is no objection to defining the Imam as one whose obedience is obligatory. This meaning accords with the doctrine of delegation of religious authority.

2. The Gradational Nature of Prophetic Virtue and the Superiority of the Prophet Muhammad According to Shi'a Exegetes

Certain prophets and divine messengers possess superiority over others: "Those messengers, we gave some of them superiority over others" (al-Baqarah: 253) and "We have indeed preferred some prophets over others." (al-Isra': 55)

Based on Qur'anic evidence and the narrations of the infallible Imams, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is the noblest of all creation and superior to everything and everyone, including the other prophets and divine saints, both in knowledge and practice. As he said:

"I am the master of the children of Adam, and this is not boasting. I am the Seal of the Prophets, the Imam of the God-wary, and the Messenger of the Lord of the worlds."

The noble progeny of the Prophet are also true divine successors. The Wise Qur'an presents their guardianship as a priceless divine blessing, just like the Prophethood of the final Messenger (Javadi Amoli, 2014 AD/1393 SH: 9, 281).

All the prophets gave glad tidings concerning the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, which itself show his unique and unmatched status: "O! Children of Israel, I am the messenger of God to you, confirming what is before me..." (Ṣaff: 6)

This meaning is further emphasized in a narration from the Prophet (PBUH). He said to Imam Ali (AS):

"The Exalted Creator has never created anyone nobler or more honored than me... O! Ali, God has preferred His messengers over His near angels, and He has preferred me over all the prophets and messengers. O! Ali, after me this superiority is for you and your descendants. The angels are our servants and the servants of our followers... O! Ali, Were it not for us, God would not have created Adam, Eve, Paradise, Hell, the heavens, or the earth." (Majlisī, 1982 AD/1403 AH: 26, 335)

Allamah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, under the verse "Those messengers, We preferred some of them over others..." (al-Baqarah: 253) explains that God uses the term "Those" (a demonstrative pronoun for distant objects) to emphasize the exalted rank of the prophets. This expression indicates that God has not placed all prophets at the same level; rather, He has established ranks of superiority among them (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1995 AD/1374 SH: 2, 470).

Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi also refers to various factors that cause differences in prophetic ranks, such as the scope of the divine mission, having a scripture, or being given a new law (Misbah Yazdi, 2018 AD/1397 SH: 403).

Many other Shi'a exegetes such as Ṭabrisī, Fayḍ Kāshānī, and others also emphasize, based on verse 253 of Surah *al-Baqarah*, the gradational nature of the prophets and the superiority of the Prophet Muhammad over all other prophets (Ṭabrisī, n.d.: 3, 101; Fayḍ Kāshānī, 1994 AD/1415 AH: 1, 280).

3. The Gradational Nature of Prophetic Virtue and the Superiority of the Prophet According to Sunni Exegetes

Fakhr Rāzī, one of the major Sunni exegetes, states under verse 253 of Surah *al-Baqarah* that:

"The Islamic community has consensus that some prophets are superior to others, and based on this consensus, the Prophet Muhammad is the most superior of all prophets."

Fakhr Rāzī cites twenty reasons to prove the superiority of the Prophet Muhammad. To avoid unnecessary length, only the most important ones are mentioned here, especially since *Rāzī* is among the major Sunni exegetes:

1) God's statement: "We have not sent you except as a mercy to the worlds." (al-Anbīyā': 107) Being a mercy to all worlds necessarily implies superiority over all of them.

2) God says: "And We raised your mention." (al-Sharḥ: 4) It is said that this exaltation of the Prophet's name appears in the fact that his name is mentioned in the call to prayer and in the testimony of faith, whereas the names of other prophets are not.

3) God paired obedience to the Prophet with obedience to Himself: "Whoever obeys the Messenger has obeyed God." (al-Nisā': 80) Likewise, He paired allegiance to the Prophet with allegiance to Himself: "Those who pledge allegiance to you are indeed pledging allegiance to God; the Hand of God is above their hands." (al-Fatḥ: 10) And He linked the Prophet's honor with His own honor: "Honor belongs to God, His Messenger..." (al-Munāfiqūn: 8)

4) God challenged the disbelievers to produce even one surah like the Qur'an (al-Baqarah: 23). The smallest surah, *al-Kawthar*, has only three verses, yet God issued a challenge over these three verses, whereas the entire Qur'an contains more than six thousand verses. This implies that the Qur'an is not one miracle but thousands of miracles. If this is true, then God supported Moses with nine signs, but He supported the Prophet Muhammad with thousands of miracles, an

undeniable indication of his superiority (*Fakhr Rāzī*, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 6, 521)

Ṭabarānī, another Sunni exegete, states regarding the superiority of the Prophet based on Surah al-Baqarah, verse 253:

"The meaning of the verse is that the figures whose stories God revealed in the Qur'an are all messengers, but these messengers are not equal in virtue. Some of them are superior to others in this world and in the Hereafter... and this verse intends to show the superiority of the Prophet Muhammad over all prophets, as in God's statement: "We raised your mention." (*Ṭabarānī*, 2008: 1, 459)

Zamakhsharī, in his commentary on this verse, also refers to the elevated rank of the Prophet over other prophets, and *Ṭabarī* cites a narration from *Mujāhid* supporting this interpretation (*Zamakhsharī*, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 1, 297; *Ṭabarī*, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 3, 2)

Based on the discussions above, all major Sunni exegetes acknowledge the gradational nature of the ranks of the prophets and affirm that the Prophet Muhammad occupies the highest rank among them.

4. Analysis and Preference of Opinions on the Gradational Nature of Prophetic Virtue and the Superiority of the Prophet According to Both Schools

Considering the various evidences provided by Sunni exegetes, such as *Fakhr Rāzī* and *Ṭabarānī*, as well as the Qur'anic verses and narrations cited by Shi'a exegetes, there is *no disagreement* between the two schools on the gradational nature of prophetic virtue or on the superiority of the Prophet Muhammad.

Ultimately, both schools unanimously affirm that prophetic ranks are gradational and that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is superior to all other prophets.

4.1. Views of Shi'a Exegetes on the Superiority of Imamate Over Prophethood

The Imami Shi'a consider Imamate to be a divine, heavenly institution, and in defining it, they regard the Imam as possessing a status that transcends worldly authority.

Among these scholars is *Shaykh Ṣadūq*, who states: "This is the meaning of Imamate, for Imamate is derived from "*al-I'timām*" (following and emulation), and "*I'timām*" means following someone, emulating him, acting as he acts, and speaking as he speaks." (*Sadūq*, n.d.: 69)

Ibn Maytham Baḥrānī also defines Imamate as: "General leadership over all matters of religion and worldly life by divine appointment." (*Baḥrānī*, n.d.: 1, 174)

However, it is necessary to refer to the views of exegetes regarding the superiority of the rank of Imamate over Prophethood, so that the purpose of this section becomes clear. Among those who address this question is Allamah *Ṭabāṭabā'ī*, who provides several arguments for the superiority of Imamate:

1) Abraham Imamate at the end of his life. Regarding the verse "And when his Lord tested Abraham...", (al-Baqarah: 124) as previously explained, this noble verse indicates that God granted Abraham the rank of Imamate, and this event occurred late in his life, in his old age and *after* the birth of *Ismā'īl* and *Ishāq*. The proof is that after God's statement "I will make you an Imam for the people," Abraham responds by saying: "And from my descendants [as well]." Had the bestowal of Imamate occurred before the angels gave him glad tidings of the birth of *Ismā'īl* and *Ishāq*, Abraham would not have had knowledge, or even expectation, of having offspring.

2) Furthermore, the verse "And when his Lord tested Abraham with certain trials, and he

fulfilled them, [God] said: "I will make you an Imam for the people..." indicates that this grant of Imamate occurred after the trials God placed upon him. It is known that these trials include a variety of tribulations mentioned in the Qur'an, the greatest of which was the command to sacrifice his son *Ismā'īl* (*Ṭabāṭabā'ī*, 1995 AD/1374 SH: 1, 405).

Ṭabrisī to establish the superiority of Imamate, first identifies two meanings for Imamate, and then adopts the second one to support his argument:

1) Imam is one whom people follow in speech and action.

2) Imam is one who administers the affairs of the nation, implements God's laws, punishes violators, grants authority to those worthy of leadership, and wages war and jihad against those who oppose the community.

According to the first meaning, every prophet is also an Imam, because the speech and actions of every prophet are a model for his community.

However, according to the second meaning, Imamate is a distinct and elevated office, and not every prophet is necessarily an Imam (*Ṭabrisī*, n.d.: 2, 34).

Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, in discussing the superiority of Imamate over Prophethood, refers to the story of Prophet Abraham and states that the Imam, who is a guide, must be "Guided in essence" and must possess inner divine guidance that comes directly from God (*Javadi Amoli*, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 6, 414).

Najarzadegan, after rejecting the claim that Imamate is identical to Prophethood, demonstrates the superiority of Imamate. He ultimately presents the following conclusions:

1. The phrase "Indeed I make you [an Imam]" indicates present tense with continuous creation (a sustained divine appointment).

2. Abraham became aware of his trials through revelation or at least the very address "Indeed I make you..." came through revelation. Therefore, he must have already been a prophet to receive revelation.

3. If the sacrifice of *Ismā'īl* is counted among these trials, then it is certain that the granting of Imamate occurred after Prophethood and Messengership, and late in Abraham's life.

4. In verses (al-Hijr: 53-55), Abraham expresses astonishment at the angels' glad tidings of a child, saying he is of advanced age. Therefore, either:

- His Imamate must have occurred during his old age, at which point he was given offspring, thus Imamate would be superior to Prophethood and Messengership, since he undoubtedly became a prophet long before reaching old age; or

- Imamate occurred during his youth or middle age. But this second possibility is invalid, since, as Allamah says, making such a request for his descendants at that stage of life would be contrary to proper etiquette (Najarzadegan, 2021 AD/1400 SH: 83)

Other scholars such as Makarem Shirazi and Qadrān Maleki have also offered arguments for the superiority of Imamate, which are not detailed here (Qadrān Qaramaleki, 2013 AD/1392 SH: 95-96; Makarem Shirazi, 1992 AD/1371 SH: 1, 441)

Based on the Imami perspective, which considers Imamate a divine institution, and on their arguments that Abraham attained Imamate late in life after numerous trials, the meaning of Imamate is understood to be inner, spiritual, and metaphysical guidance. The Imam is one who guides people through influence over their hearts.

This rank is far superior and more exalted than Prophethood.

4.2. Views of Sunni Exegetes on the Superiority of Imamate Over Prophethood

Given the technical definition that Sunni scholars assign to the rank of Imamate, it becomes clear that they reduce the status of Imamate and analyze it merely as a governmental, political, and social matter. Any action regarding it is considered not a divine affair, but rather a worldly and communal one. In other words, they regard Imamate as a jurisprudential, secondary, and practical matter, an action for which the legally responsible individual is accountable. Thus, determining the caliph or Imam is left to the people, through mechanisms such as pledge of allegiance or the council of decision and contract. As a result, the ruler is considered an ordinary human being.

That Imamate is a divine act and a matter of theology and fundamental belief, as the Shi'a maintain, is explicitly denied by the Sunnis (Qadrān Qaramaleki, 2013 AD/1392 SH: 30).

Sunni exegetes have not explicitly discussed the rank of Imamate in this verse (al-Baqarah: 124), nor have they engaged with the Shi'a position to affirm or refute it. They only attempt to explain the meaning of "Imam," and most of them interpret it as meaning "Prophet." (Najarzadegan, 2021 AD/1400 SH: 90)

Among them is *Fakhr Rāzī*, who offers three arguments to establish that Imamate in this verse means Prophethood. He states:

"The people of inquiry say that the "Imam" here means "Prophet," and this claim can be proven through several arguments:

1. God made Abraham an Imam for all people, and one whose leadership is made universal must necessarily be a Messenger from God and independent in his religious law. If he follows another Messenger, then he is a follower, not an Imam, which contradicts universal leadership.

2. The phrase "I will make you an Imam" indicates that Abraham is an Imam in all matters, and one who holds such a comprehensive Imamate must be a Prophet.

3. Prophets are the leaders of people, and it is obligatory for people to follow them... Likewise, caliphs are Imams in their own rank, and people must accept their rulings. Judges, jurists, and prayer leaders are also Imams. Thus, the term Imam applies to anyone who is worthy of being followed in religious matters within his rank... Since the prophets occupy the highest rank of Imamate, we must interpret the term "Imam" in this verse as Prophethood, because the verse is expressing divine favor, and thus the term must refer to the highest form of Imamate, that is, absolute Imamate, which is exclusive to the prophets, since only prophets are leaders in all religious matters.

Ālūsī, in "*Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī*," similarly interprets the verse "Indeed I make you an Imam for the people" to mean that Abraham's trials occurred before his Prophethood, and that God made these trials the cause for granting him Prophethood (*Ālūsī*, 1994 AD/1415 AH: 1, 374).

5. Analysis and Evaluation of the Opinions of Both Schools on the Superiority of Imamate Over Prophethood

As noted earlier, based on their technical definition of Imamate, Sunni scholars interpret "Imam" either as "A leader in religious ritual and practice" or simply as "A prophet." It is evident from this that the Sunnis lower the rank of Imamate, treating it merely as a governmental, political, and social matter, not as a divine appointment. In their view, Imamate is a jurisprudential branch-issue and a human responsibility, and thus the appointment of a caliph or Imam is left to people through various means such as pledge of allegiance or

consultation. Therefore, the ruler is regarded as an ordinary human being. From the perspective of Sunni exegetes, the rank of Imamate is ultimately equal to Prophethood and has no superiority over it.

However, Shi'a exegetes consider Imamate superior to Prophethood, and they argue this point based on Qur'anic verses and narrations. The primary verse discussed is Surah *al-Baqarah*, verse 124, which establishes that the rank of Imamate was granted to Abraham late in life and after multiple divine trials, at a time when he already possessed Prophethood. If Imamate were identical to Prophethood, then granting it after the trials would make no sense, nor would distinguish it from Prophethood.

Thus, the Imami view of the superiority of Imamate over Prophethood is firmly grounded in the Qur'an. Moreover, numerous narrations affirm this, including the narration from Imam *Riḍā* (AS):

"Indeed, God Almighty granted Abraham the Imamate after Prophethood and intimate friendship as a third rank, and made it a virtue by which He honored him and exalted his remembrance." (*Kulaynī*, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 1, 199)

Therefore, based on the strong textual and doctrinal evidence presented by the Imami school, the Shi'a exegetical position is to be preferred.

6. Conclusion of the Discussion

Considering the views and definitions presented by Sunni scholars regarding the rank of Imamate, any discussion about the gradational nature of Imamate from their perspective becomes irrelevant. This is because, in many contexts, they interpret Imamate as synonymous with Prophethood, and therefore, from their viewpoint, the rank of Imamate is not superior to the rank of Prophethood.

However, based on the discussions presented by Imami (Shi'a) exegetes, the rank of Imamate is superior to that of Prophethood. Since the superiority of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) over all other prophets has been established, and since it was also shown that Prophet Abraham attained the rank of Imamate late in his blessed life, the following conclusion is reached:

Both Prophet Abraham and the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) possessed the rank of Imamate. And because the Prophet of Islam is superior to all prophets, including Abraham, the gradational nature of Imamate is thereby affirmed.

6.1. The Transfer of the Rank of Imamate to Imam 'Alī (AS)

In the discussion on the transfer of Imamate to Imam 'Alī (AS) on the Day of *Ghadīr*, it appears necessary to examine the phrase "What has been revealed to you" in Qur'an 5:67. To understand this phrase, the various functions and roles of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) must be analyzed, so that it becomes clear which of these functions were transferred to Imam 'Alī (AS) on the Day of *Ghadīr*.

The roles of the Prophet (PBUH) may be summarized as follows:

1) The Function of Messengership and Conveyance

This refers to conveying God's commands and directives to the people, as seen in the following verses:

- The Messenger is not responsible except for clear conveyance (al-'Ankabūt: 18).
- Upon you is only the duty of conveyance (al-Shūrā: 48).

Since the restriction in these verses is a relative restriction, this duty remains constant but is not exclusive of other prophetic functions.

2) The Function of Imamate

"Say, "Obey God and obey the Messenger. But if you turn away, then only upon him is what

he is responsible for, and upon you is what you are responsible for. And if you obey him, you will be rightly guided. And upon the Messenger is only clear conveyance." (al-Nūr: 54)

The Imamate mentioned in this verse refers to the divinely-delegated Imamate granted only to those chosen by God.

3) The Function of Judgement

"They are avid listeners to falsehood, devourers of unlawful gain. If they come to you, judge between them or turn away from them. If you turn away from them, they will not harm you at all; but if you judge, then judge between them with justice. Indeed, God loves those who act justly." (al-Mā'idah: 42)

The first two functions (Messengership and Imamate) pertain to religion, law, and guidance, and therefore imply the necessity of impeccability.

However, judgment is based on witnesses and oaths, and therefore may not always reflect absolute reality.

As stated in *Uṣūl al-Kāfi*, the Prophet (PBUH) said:

"I judge between you only on the basis of evidence and oaths. Some of you may present their argument more eloquently than others; so if I grant someone a portion of his brother's property (based on such evidence), then it is truly a portion of the Fire that I am granting him." (Kulaynī, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 7, 414)

4) The Function of Social Governance and Administration

Based on the verses: "O! You who believe, obey God, obey the Messenger, and those vested with authority among you. If you differ in anything, refer it to God and the Messenger..." (al-Nisā': 59) and "Consult them in the matter." (Āli 'Imrān: 159)

In matters of governance, the Prophet (PBUH) would consult others, then make a

decision, and thereafter place his trust in God. Naturally, consultation is not protected by infallibility; thus the Prophet would evaluate and synthesize the opinions offered.

5) Humanity

According to the verse, "Say, I am only a human being like you, to whom revelation is sent, that your God is indeed One God," (al-Kahf: 110) the Prophet possessed a human status just like other human beings.

However, what was conveyed to Imam Ali (AS) on the day of *Ghadīr* was the religious and guiding authority of the Prophet, as well as the station of his Imamate, based on various reasons such as verse 67 of *al-Mā'idah* and the verse of Completion (al-Mā'idah: 3). The analysis of these verses is not the purpose of this article. It is self-evident that when an Imam is not chosen by people for governance or judgment, his role remains only that of religious authority and guidance for the people. When there is no acceptance or inclination from the people, the infallible Imam exercises only this religious and guiding role, which is transferred from one Imam to another; thus Islam remains alive and does not perish. Therefore, the enemies of Islam sought to eliminate the Imams' religious authority and guidance, but by God's will they will never succeed. As a result, on the day of *Ghadīr*, for the reasons mentioned, explained by exegetes in connection with verses 67 and 3 of *al-Mā'idah*, the station of Imamate was transferred to Imam Ali (AS).

6.2. The superiority of the Shi'a Imams over the Prophets

According to the Shi'a definition of Imamate and earlier discussions, Imamate is a rank higher than prophethood. Consequently, with the two premises, the superiority of Imamate over prophethood and the appointment of Imam Ali (AS) to the station of Imamate, the Shi'a

Imams are superior to other prophets (except the Prophet of Islam).

This discussion establishes the superiority of the Imams over prophets who were not Imams. However, through Qur'anic verses and narrations, the superiority of the Shi'a Imams, especially Imam Ali, over other prophets can be demonstrated more explicitly. Among these is the verse of *Mubāhala*, in which Imam Ali is the referent of "Ourselves," considered as the "Self" and peer of the Prophet. There are also narrations emphasizing the unity of the light of Imam Ali with the light of the Prophet, as well as narrations referring to the inscription of the Imams' names in Paradise and their introduction to the prophets (Qadrdan Qaramaleki, 2013 AD/1392 SH: 99-106).

Ayatollah Sobhani also states, in commentary on verse 24 of *al-Sajdah*, "And We appointed from among them leaders who guided by Our command, when they were patient..." (al-Sajdah: 24) that the use of the phrase "From among them" indicates that not all prophets attained the station of Imamate; rather, only some of them possessed this rank. The Twelve Imams are neither prophets nor messengers, because the Noble Prophet (PBUH) is the Seal of the Prophets and Messengers. However, they are, by God's appointment, Imams and leaders. Based on this principle, their superiority over prophets who did not possess the rank of Imamate is certain, and in terms of virtue and excellence they are equal to prophets who did possess this rank. *Sayyid Hibat al-Dīn al-Shahristānī* writes in response to the author of *Awā'il al-Maqālāt*: "The caliphate and succession of the master of the messengers is not inferior to prophethood. Therefore, although our Imams did not possess the station of prophethood, they were successors to the greatest of prophets." He then adds an analogy: "It is possible for the minister

of a great and powerful state to be far higher in rank than the ruler of a small nation." (Sobhani, 2008 AD/1387 SH: 361)

Considering the views of the exegetes and the demonstration of the superiority of Imamate over prophethood, it can certainly be concluded that the station of the Imams, whom the Shi'a regard as the heirs and successors of the Messenger, is far above that of prophets who were not Imams. Furthermore, the superiority of the Shi'a Imams, especially Imam Ali (AS), is demonstrable through verses and narrations.

6.3. The gradational nature of Imamate among the Imams

The Fourteen Infallibles possess a single unified reality; in other words, they originate from one and the same divine light. This unity of light among the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) is explicitly mentioned in many narrations, sometimes referring to the Five People of the Cloak and at other times to all of the infallibles.

A) God the Exalted said: "O! Muhammad, I created you, *‘Alī, Fāṭimah, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn* from the essence of My light. I presented your guardianship to the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth. Whoever accepted it was, in My view, among the believers, and whoever rejected it was, in My view, among the disbelievers. O! Muhammad, if a servant among My servants were to worship Me until his body becomes worn like an old leather bag, then he comes to Me rejecting your guardianship, I would never forgive him until he draws near to Me through your guardianship." (Majlisī, 1982 AD/1403 AH: 26, 216) This narration is one of the *Mi'rāj* traditions in which God addresses the Prophet: "O! Muhammad, I created you, *‘Alī, Fāṭimah, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn* from My own light..." and continues with the themes of guardianship and acceptance.

B) "O! Muhammad, indeed I created *‘Alī, Fāṭimah, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn*, and the Imams from a single light. Then I presented their authority to the angels. Whoever among the angels accepted it was counted among the nearest ones, and whoever rejected it was among the disbelievers. O! Muhammad, if a servant from among My servants were to worship Me until his life ends, then comes to Me while denying their authority, I would admit him into the Fire..." (Majlisī, 1982 AD/1403 AH: 36, 223).

This narration explicitly states that all the Imams share one single light.

However, this unity of light does not necessarily mean equality in the degree of light. One may maintain the idea of a single origin of light while accepting that its degrees differ.

Because, first, the narrations say "From one light," meaning the "Ahl al-Bayt are from the same type of light," which is fundamentally different from saying "They are all one and the same light." The first expression means that the source and essence of their light is of one kind, but it does not state that they possess the exact same degree or rank of luminosity.

Different lights, although all of them are "Light" and originate from one truth, may vary in intensity; one light may be stronger, another weaker. Of course, all these degrees are gradational; that is, just as their common point is "Being Light," their distinctions also lie within the reality of "Light."

Therefore, based on the wording of the narrations, the Imams (AS) can share the same essence of light while possessing different gradational degrees.

Second, according to some narrations, it is stated in *Zīyārat al-Jāmi'ah*:

"I bear witness that this [status] was yours in the past and remains yours in the future. Indeed, your lights, your bodies, your forms, your

shadows, your spirits, and your clay are one." (Ibn Bābawayh, 1992 AD/1413 AH: 2, 613)

In this *Ziyārah*, the bodies, lights, and spirits of the Ahl al-Bayt are described as one, even though differences in their physical bodies are undeniable. Therefore, the meaning must be that the essence or origin of their bodily creation is one, and that they are "One" despite differences in form and structure. This interpretation can also apply to the unity of their lights: "Meaning that although they differ in degree, they originate from the same single light." (Tarkhan, 2009 AD/1388 SH: rasekhoon.net)

As for explaining that the station of Imamate among the Imams is also gradational, Ayatollah Jawadi Amoli notes:

"Every being that possesses greater perfection reflects divine perfection more fully. Among all beings in existence, none reflects Godliness as completely as the Perfect Human; for not being, not even the angels, and possesses the diversity of existential perfections found in the infallible Perfect Human."

Even among perfect humans, there are differences in their share of perfection, and thus differences in how much they serve as signs of God's majesty and perfection. For this reason, Imam Ali (AS) said:

"There is no news of God greater than me, and no sign of God greater than me."

Accordingly, each of the Imams (AS), who after the Prophet are considered the most excellent beings in the realm of existence, is a supreme sign of God and a great divine herald; for together they constitute one light shining through fourteen manifestations. Thus, the pure Imams are the highest examples, the greatest signs, and the most complete mirrors for the Divine Names and Attributes. Through knowing them, one may know God's Names and Attributes; the more precisely one studies these mirrors and

understands their dimensions, the more one's knowledge of God increases, even though grasping the inner essence of the Divine Names and the Divine Essence itself is impossible (Jawadi Amoli, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 2, 109).

Another possible explanation for the unity of their spirits, light, and clay is that all of them existed in a unified, undifferentiated form in the divine treasury, and then manifested in different forms as they descended into the created world. The evaluation of unity of path, unity of goal, and similar themes can also justify the description of their luminous unity, just as the unity of the prophets and messengers is affirmed even though they possess different levels of excellence. Although the prophets affirmed one another (confirming what was before him), they nevertheless differ in rank:

"We have preferred some prophets over others" and "These messengers, We gave some of them superiority over others." (Jawadi Amoli, 2014 AD/1393 SH: 9, 39)

Conclusion

In this article, the gradational nature of the station of Imamate from the perspective of exegetes of both Sunni and Shi'a traditions was examined. From what has been stated, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. All exegetes of both groups unanimously believe that the Prophet of Islam is the greatest of the prophets and that he also possesses the station of Imamate.

2. Based on the Shi'a understanding of Imamate, which considers it a divinely appointed matter, and based on their arguments that Abraham attained the station of Imamate late in life after numerous trials, the meaning of Imamate is an inner and spiritual guidance of the hearts. The Imam is the one who guides through influence over hearts, and this rank is far higher and more exalted than the rank of prophethood.

3. Considering the views of the exegetes and the affirmation of the superiority of Imamate over prophethood, it can certainly be concluded that the station of the Imams, whom the Shi'a regard as the heirs and successors of the Messenger, is far superior to prophets who were not Imams. Moreover, the superiority of the Shi'a Imams, especially Imam Ali (AS), can be substantiated through Qur'anic verses and narrations.

4. The discussion of the gradational nature of Imamate among specific individuals such as the Imams (AS) themselves was not the focus of this article, and only a small number of contemporary exegetes have expressed opinions on this matter. Among them is Ayatollah Jawadi Amoli, who does not rule out the possibility of variation in the degrees of the Imams. In his view, such a matter is theoretically possible, though applying it to the verses revealed on this subject is not easy in practice.

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«مقاله پژوهشی»

مطالعه تطبیقی تشکیکی بودن مقام امامت از منظر تشیع و اهل تسنن بر اساس آیه ۲۵۳ بقره

داود صائمی^{۱*}، زهرا سپهری^۲

چکیده

بحث امامت، از مباحث مهم کلامی در میان مفسران و کلامیون اهل تشیع بوده و آیات و روایات فراوانی در این زمینه مورد بحث و بررسی قرار گرفته است. این مقاله، با روش نقلی و حیانی، با رویکردی توصیفی تحلیلی، سعی نموده است نظریات مختلف را بر اساس اسناد کتابخانه‌ای، مورد مطالعه قرار دهد. هدف این مقاله بررسی ذو مراتب بودن مقام امامت با تکیه بر ذومراتب بودن مقام نبوت بوده و لذا قصد بررسی مصداقی تفاضل مقام امامت مورد بحث این مقاله نبوده است. نتایج به دست آمده از بررسی نظرات، چنین می‌نماید که تعریف علما و مفسران اهل سنت با مفسران امامیه کاملاً متفاوت بوده، لذا بحث در مورد اعتقاد علمای اهل سنت در مورد ذو مراتب بودن مقام امامت منتفی است؛ زیرا بسیاری از آنان مقام امامت را مساوی نبوت دانسته و به مقامی بالاتر از نبوت قائل نمی‌باشند. اما امامیه معتقد است که مقام امامت بالاتر از نبوت بوده و با توجه به ذو مراتب بودن مقام نبوت، ذو مراتب بودن مقام امامت را می‌توان اثبات کرد. اما در مورد ذو مراتب بودن و تفاضل میان امامان، مطلبی با صراحت از طرف علمای شیعه ذکر نگردیده و در نهایت آیت‌الله جوادی آملی تفاضل میان ائمه علیهم‌السلام را بعید ندانسته و اثباتاً تطبیق آن با آیات نازل را آسان نمی‌داند.

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۱. استادیار، گروه علوم قرآن و حدیث، دانشگاه علوم و معارف قرآن کریم، شاهرود، ایران
۲. طلبه سطح چهارحوزه قاسم ابن الحسن علیه السلام، گرایش تفسیر تطبیقی، تهران، ایران.

نویسنده مسئول:

داود صائمی

رایانامه: da.saemi@quran.ac.ir

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