

AN INQUIRY INTO INTERCESSION

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ABSTRACT: Intercession (*shafā'ah*), the act of an intercessor when he asks God for forgiveness and help on behalf of sinners, is of two types: generative and legislative. It is a principle found in many Islamic schools of thought, although questioned by some. This paper analyzes and explains the verses of the Qur'an regarding intercession and replies to several objections raised by its opposers. Qur'anic verses on intercession do not contradict one another; rather, they emphasize that intercession inherently belongs to God, and some special servants of God are entitled to intercede by His permission. This paper also refers to Sunni and Shi'a hadiths in support of the principle of intercession and ends by highlighting some of its positive outcomes, such as preventing sinners from despairing of Allah's mercy and promoting a stronger relationship with those who can intercede. Based on Qur'anic verses and hadiths, those who have been granted permission by Allah to intercede include prophets, angels, martyrs, and religious scholars.

Intercession is a shared principle in many Islamic schools of thought. Moreover, Twelver Shi'ites believe in intercession by prophets, Imams, and even martyrs and religious scholars. Like Shi'a thinkers, Sunni scholars underscore the truth of this Islamic teaching to such an extent that some Sunni thinkers have written books on intercession

that beautifully respond to various doubts on it.¹ However, Wahhabism - founded by Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahhab - who was inspired by the thoughts of Ibn Taymiyyah, questioned and attempted to refute intercession, and considered those who believe in the concept to be polytheists. This paper responds to doubts about intercession from the Qur'anic and hadith perspectives focusing on both Sunni and Shi'a sources.

The Literal and Technical Meaning of Shafā'ah

According to philologists, shafā'ah derives from the root *shaf'* which means 'even' in contrast to odd. In this way, *shafā'ah* means to be linked and attached to something.² In the same vein, the reason why an intercessor is called *shafi'* in Arabic is that he attaches the person interceded for to himself, meets his needs, and saves him.³

The technical meaning of *shafa'āh* is to help someone by negotiating on his behalf and asking the judge or the ruler or the like for some kind of exemption or forgiveness that on the Day of Judgment, with God's permission, the intercessor will request God to save the one interceded for from Hell, and will help the latter to enter Heaven.

Types of Intercession

Intercession can be divided into two parts:

1. Generative Intercession

Generative (*takwini*) intercession refers to intercession in the literal sense with its endless occurrences. There are boundless instances of

¹ See Sheikh Muhammad Mutiwalli Sha'rawi, *al-Shafa'ah wal-Maqam al-Mahmud*, Beirut: al-Maktabatul-Misriyyah (Egyptian publications).

² Khalil Farahidi, *Kitab-ul-'Ayn*, vol. 2, p. 627; Ibn Manzur, *Lisan-ul-'Arab*, vol. 8, p. 83; Raghīb Isfahani, *Mufradat*, vol. 2, p.33.

³ Ja'far Subhani, *al-Wahhabiyah fil-Mizan*, p. 292; Najmu-Din Tabasi, *A Rational Approach to Wahhabi Beliefs*, vol. 1, p.5.

generative intercession in the world. All the causes intercede for their effects in order to come into existence. There is a tendency for stronger beings to help the weak. For instance, when the seeds of plants split open and the feeble sprout emerges, the soil provides it with nutrients, the sun shines at it with its warm light, and it pours with life-sustaining rain from dense clouds. As a result, this delicate creature can overcome obstacles and turn into a giant, luxuriant tree. Likewise, capable parents who protect and raise their feeble infant and the knowledgeable person who helps the ignorant one are examples of generative intercession.⁴

2. Legislative Intercession

Legislative (*tashri'i*) intercession is based on the technical meaning of the term, that is, the act of mediating between two parties, and the intercessor attaches himself to the person in need of intercession, meets his needs, and tries to save him. According to Shi'a and many Sunni scholars, at least the prophets enjoy this right.

As to how intercessors intercede for sinners, their intercession is a reflection of the generative intercession, although this occurs in the hereafter. Imam Ali said, "Intercession is the wings of the one who asks for forgiveness."⁵ In other words, just as the nestlings learn how to fly with the help of their parents, intercessors are the wings of the sinner that can help him achieve salvation and perfection.⁶

The Philosophy of Intercession

Does intercession encourage sinners to commit more sins and eventually cause man to lag behind others in achieving perfection? In other words, what is the purpose of intercession? Why does God,

⁴Nasir Makarim Shirazi, *The Message of the Quran*, vol. 6, p. 522; Sayyid Hasan Tahiri Khurram-Abadi, *Intercession*, p.104.

⁵ *Nahjul-Balaghah*, Feid-ul-Islam, sayings, no. 60, p.1115.

⁶ Nasir Makarim Shirazi, *The Message of the Qur'an*, vol. 6, p.522.

Who can intercede Himself, grant this privilege to some of His servants? To answer these questions, it is important to discuss the positive outcomes of intercession for those who seek it. The philosophy of intercession includes:

1. Giving hope and removing despair

When a person gives in to his carnal desires and commits sins as a result, this can lead to feelings of hopelessness. God through His Wisdom offers intercession as an option. This hope for intercession by the Friends of God, that is, the Prophets and Imams, makes man optimistic about life and Allah's mercy; he endeavors to do good deeds to rise to a higher spiritual rank that makes him deserving of intercession.

2. Developing a spiritual relationship with the Friends of God

Intercession encourages people to familiarize themselves with the Ahlul Bayt. This in itself furthers a person's mental and spiritual growth and perfection. Knowing that the Ahlul Bayt can intercede with God on the Day of Judgment, a person would try to acquaint himself with them and establish with them a close spiritual relationship. Another positive outcome of this relationship is man's endeavor to make them pleased with him, which in turn is divine satisfaction.⁷

Muslim Scholars' View on Intercession

Most Islamic schools of thought believe in intercession. Since Shi'as firmly believe in it, in what follows intercession is investigated from the viewpoint of Sunni scholars.

Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Muslim Neishaburi, Muhammad ibn Yazid Qazwini, the author of *Sunan of Ibn Majah*, Nisa'i, the author of

⁷ Nasir Makarim Shirazi, *The Message of the Qur'an*, vol. 6, p.524.

Sunan of Nisa'i, narration of hadiths⁸ from the Holy Prophet about intercession displays their belief in intercession.

Additionally, the following Sunni scholars stressed on their conviction in intercession: Soyuti in the book *A-Dur-ul-Manthur*⁹, Rashid Rida, the author of the Qur'anic Commentary *Al-Minar*¹⁰, Zamakhshari in the Qur'anic Commentary *Kashshaf*¹¹, Khatib Baghdadi in *The History of Baghdad*,¹² and Tabarani in *Al-Jami' al-Kabir*.¹³

Intercession in the Quran

The word *shafa'a* and other words derived from it are repeated in the Holy Qur'an almost 30 times. Some of these Qur'anic verses are cited by the Wahhabis to deny intercession the same are cited by the Shi'as to prove it. On the other hand, God asserts in the Quran that there are no contradictions in the Qur'an:

لو كان من عند غير الله لوجدوا فيه اختلافا كثيرا

*Had it been from other than God, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy.*¹⁴

Likewise, according to Imam Ali, it is impossible to find any discrepancy in the Qur'an: "Surely some parts of the Noble Qur'an

⁸ These narrations and their references will be mentioned in what follows.

⁹ Soyuti, *a-Dur-ul-Manthur*, vol.1, p. 329.

¹⁰ Rashid Rida, *The Qur'anic Commentary al-Minar*, vol.7, p.602 & vol.8, p.8.

¹¹ Zamakhshari, *The Qur'anic Commentary Kashshaf*, vol. 3, p.444.

¹² Khatib Baghdadi, *The History of Baghdad*, vol. 13, p.476.

¹³ Tabarani, *al-Jami' al-Kabir*, vol. 18, p. 547; cited in Ali Kurani, *Islamic Beliefs*, vol. 3, p.130.

¹⁴ *Nisa'*, 83.

elaborate on its other sections, and some parts of it attest to its other sections.”¹⁵

Hence, all Qur’anic verses should be examined and classified together. The Qu’ranic view can then be inferred by taking all of them into account.

Verses that Deny Intercession

The first group of verses refutes intercession entirely:

يا أيها الذين آمنوا أنفقوا مما رزقناكم من قبل أن يأتي يوم لا بيع فيه ولا
خلة ولا شفاعة والكافرون هم الظالمون

*O’ you who believe! Spend [in the way of God] out of [the bounties] We have provided for you, before the Day comes when no bargaining [will avail you], nor friendship nor intercession, and the unbelievers; they are the wrong-doers.*¹⁶

The above-mentioned verse explicitly negates intercession on the Day of Judgment and is often cited to disprove intercession. However, based on other related verses, there are two points that prevent us from definite denial of intercession:

Firstly, the next verse demonstrates that none but Allah can intercede, unless granted His permission:

من ذا الذي يشفع عنده إلا بإذنه

¹⁵ *Nahjul-Balaghah*, ‘Abdu, sermon 136.

¹⁶ Baqarah, 254.

*Who can intercede in His presence except with His Permission?*¹⁷

Although intercession on the Day of Judgment is not deduced from this verse, one cannot completely deny the concept of intercession nor can one question this disbelief. Those who are interested are instead encouraged to refer to other verses.

Second, to understand the Qur'anic viewpoint, related verses must be considered. And through careful attention to the term “*nor friendship*,” we understand that God negates intercession based on friendship ties, not intercession itself. In other words, on the Day of Resurrection, ties of friendship among the disbelievers will be cut while those amid the pious will be maintained:

الاخلاء يومئذ بعضهم لبعض عدو إلا المتقين

*Friends on that day will be foes, one to another except the pious.*¹⁸

Likewise, although the first verse refutes friendship on the Day of Resurrection, the second verse reveals that God means negating false friendship. In what follows, we will refer to other relevant Qur'anic verses to learn the true Qur'anic reading on intercession.

Verses that seemingly suggest intercession being restricted to Allah

The second group of verses presents intercession as exclusive to God:

¹⁷ Baqarah, 255.

¹⁸ Zukhruf, 67.

وأندر به الذين يخافون أن يحشروا إلى ربهم ليس لهم من دونه ولي ولا
شفيح لعلهم يتقون

Give this warning to those in whose [hearts] is the fear that they will be brought [to judgment] before their Lord: except for Him they will have no protector, nor intercessor that they may be pious.¹⁹

وذو الذين اتخذوا دينهم لعبا ولهوا وغرتهم الحياة الدنيا وذكر به أن تبسل
نفس بما كسبت ليس لها من دون الله ولي ولا شفيح

Leave alone those who take their religion to be mere play and amusement, and are deceived by the life of this world, and remind (them) thereby lest a soul should be given up to ruin by its own acts: it will find for itself no protector or intercessor except God.²⁰

قل لله الشفاعة جميعا

Say, intercession belongs to God exclusively.²¹

These verses emphasize that the right to forgive or intercede for sinners belongs only to God, Who created and possesses all creatures, from Whom all creatures have come into existence and to Whom they will return. Therefore, based on these verses, God will undoubtedly be an intercessor on the Day of Resurrection.

Of course, it should be noted that these verses do not oppose the idea of the proponents of intercession who believe in it as done by

¹⁹ An'am, 51.

²⁰ An'am, 70.

²¹ Zumar, 44.

intercessors on the Day of Resurrection. There are two reasons for this. First, these verses consider intercession belonging exclusively to God and proponents of intercession never regard such intercession as belonging to other intercessors; rather, they believe that these great people are given this right by God and with His permission. Second, these verses, at least some of them, shatter what the idol-worshippers believe in: idols intercede for them. In fact, the above verses emphasize such verses as the following one:

و لم يكن لهم من شركائهم شفعاء و كانوا بشركائهم كافرين

No intercessor will they have among their Partners [idols] and they will disbelieve in their Partners [idols].²²

Thus, they do not seek to deny that someone other than God intercedes. To find out whether someone other than God can intercede, we refer to additional Qur'anic verses.²³

Verses that Approve of Intercession Only with God's Permission

This third group of verses includes verses that validate the intercession of someone other than God as long as they have His permission.

من ذا الذي يشفع عنده إلا بإذنه

Who can intercede in His presence except with His Permission?²⁴

²² Rum, 13; also An'am, 94; Yunus, 18; Zumar, 43.

²³ Ja'far Subhani, *The Eternal Charter*, vol.8, p.42.

²⁴ Baqarah, 255.

ما من شفيع إلا من بعد إذنه

No intercessor [can plead with Him] except after His permission.²⁵

لا يملكون الشفاعة إلا من اتخذ عند الرحمن عهدا

None shall have the power of intercession, but such a one as has received permission [or promise] from [God], the Beneficent.²⁶

يومئذ لا تنفع الشفاعة إلا من أذن له الرحمن

On that Day they shall control no intercession except he who has made a covenant with [God], the Beneficent.²⁷

Pondering over these verses, we understand that on the Day of Judgment, intercessors can intercede only with permission of God, and independent intercession belongs only to God.

Verses that Detail the Qualities of Intercessors

In the fourth group of verses, God explicitly mentions the conditions of the intercessors on the Day of Judgment:

ولا يملك الذين يدعون من دونه الشفاعة إلا من شهد بالحق وهم يعلمون

²⁵ *Yunus*, 3.

²⁶ *Maryam*, 87.

²⁷ *Taha*, 109.

*And those whom they invoke other than God have no power of intercession; only he who bears witness to the Truth, and they know [him].*²⁸

The first part of this verse negates intercession by all deities, including angels and men. The second part grants this status to some on a number of conditions:

First, intercessors must testify to the truth; that is, monotheism.

Second, the intercessor must have knowledge of monotheism in their hearts.

ولا يشفعون إلا لمن ارتضى وهم من خشيته مشفقون

*And they offer no intercession except for those who are acceptable, and they stand in awe and reverence of His [Glory].*²⁹

This verse was revealed to deny the false beliefs of the idol-worshippers who supposed that angels are the offspring of God and consequently worshipped them in order to enjoy their intercession. Revealing this verse, God refuted their conception and emphasized that angels are fearful of God, and intercede with Him only for those with whom God is satisfied.³⁰

Proving the truth of intercession by other than God, this verse explicitly regards the intercessor as one who obeys God and fears Him. In addition, they will intercede with God only for those with whom God is satisfied. Likewise, from the previously discussed verse, one condition for intercessors is that God permits them to intercede.

²⁸ *Zukhruf*, 86.

²⁹ *Anbiya*, 28.

³⁰ Nasir Makarim Shirazi, *The Message of the Quran*, vol. 6, p. 516.

Verses that Specify the Conditions for being Granted Intercession

The fifth and final group of verses provides the conditions for those whom can be interceded for.

ما للظالمين من حميم و لا شفيع يطاع

No intimate friend nor intercessor will the wrong-doers have, who could be listened to.³¹

In the above verse, God, the Almighty conveys that wrongdoers will not be interceded for on the Day of Judgment. This verse means that intercession itself will be carried out on that day, but not everybody will be granted this mercy. Moreover, it indicates that there will be some whose word will be accepted and some others will be saved by them.

As for what is meant by wrong-doers, there are several opinions:

According to the Qur'anic commentator of the 6th century A.H., the late Amin-ul-Islam Tabarsi, wrong-doers are the polytheists and hypocrites.³²

The prominent Qur'anic commentator of the 5th century AH., Sheikh Tusi maintained that it may mean disbelievers or both disbelievers and others who do wrong and oppress others.³³

Accepting intercession in essence, the great Qur'anic commentators, Fakhr Razi and Qurtabi, considered wrongdoers to be disbelievers.³⁴

³¹ *Mu'min*, 18.

³² Amin-ul-Islam Tabarsi. *Majma'ul-Bayan*, vol. 8, p. 433.

³³ Sheikh Tusi. *al-Tibyan*, vol.9, p.65.

³⁴ Fakhr Razi. *The Great Qur'anic Commentary*, vol. 27, p.43; Qurtabi, *al-Jami' li Ahkam-l-Quran*, vol.1, p.379.

ولا يشفعون إلا لمن ارتضى وهم من خشيته مشفقون

And they offer no intercession except for those who are acceptable, and they stand in awe and reverence of His [Glory].³⁵

Based on this Qur'anic verse, a necessary condition of the one to be interceded for is that God is satisfied with him.

Conclusion derived from the verses

In order to conclude from the verses, it is necessary to list their content as follows:

1. One group entirely negates intercession.
2. Another group regards intercession as exclusive to God.
3. Still another group renders intercession by some other than God depending on His permission.
4. The next group refers to the necessary conditions of intercessors on the Day of Judgment.
5. The final group mentions the necessary conditions of those who will be interceded for on the Day of Judgment.

The question remains as whether these verses contradict one another. The last three groups do not oppose each other in the least; instead, they complement one another. The five above-mentioned groups can be decreased to three ones.

1. One group of verses completely negates intercession.
2. Another group regards it as exclusive to God.
3. Still another group proves intercession by some other than God and refers to the necessary conditions of intercessors and those who are interceded for.

³⁵ *Anbiya*, 28.

Ironing out the seeming contradiction between these three groups is not problematic, because as mentioned before, the first group of verses seeks to negate false intercession through idols or based on friendship. Thus, it does not oppose to the second and third group.

Therefore, the primary contradiction between the second and third groups must be resolved.

Before discussing this issue, it is noteworthy that these verses were revealed by God. If we considered His words self-contradictory, we would deny His necessary existent essence. On the other hand, in some verses God, regards intercession as exclusive to Himself, and in some others He introduces somebody other than Himself as entitled to intercede.

After studying both groups, we can say that intercession inherently and absolutely belongs to God; as a result, none but Him enjoys such a status. Thus, if based on some verses others are also entitled to intercede, their status is by no means independent, because this would be a real established contradiction. Hence, intercession by other intercessors depends on authorization by God. Above all, it can be said that independent intercession by some other than God is the very intercession by God. There are three reasons for this. First, the right to intercede is granted to them by God. Second, such intercession can be carried out only by His permission. Third, others will intercede only for those with whom God is satisfied. Therefore, God is present and plays a role in all stages of intercession by any than Him.

In a nutshell, based on the verses, intercession is a definite and proven fact, and others are also entitled to intercede with permission of God.

Intercession in Hadiths

In addition to the Qur'an, the idea of intercession is clearly mentioned in hadiths. These narrations are too numerous to be included in this short paper. Hence, we will refer here only to some Shi'a and Sunni hadiths.

Shi'a Hadiths on Intercession

1. The Prophet Muhammad said, "Verily my intercession will go to those from among my Ummah who have committed deadly sins."³⁶ He also said, "My intercession does not go to the one who underestimates the daily prayers."³⁷
2. Imam Ali said, "There is intercession for us, so is for those who love us."³⁸
3. Imam Sadiq said, "On the Day of Judgment, God will muster both the worshipper and the religious scholar. The worshipper will be told, "Enter Heaven," and the religious scholar will be told, "Stop and intercede for people because you have trained them well."³⁹
4. Imam Rida quoted the Holy Prophet as saying, "There are four people for whom I will intercede on the Day of Judgment: the one who reveres my offspring, he who meets their needs, anyone who helps them in an emergency, and the one who loves them in heart and in words."⁴⁰

Likewise, Imam Ali is quoted as saying, "The one who denies the intercession of the Prophet Muhammad will not enjoy his intercession."⁴¹

³⁶ Sheikh Saduq, *Man La Yahduruhul-Faqih*, vol. 3, p. 574.

³⁷ Kulaini, *al-Kafi*, vol. 6, p. 400.

³⁸ Sheikh Saduq, *al-Khisal*, p. 624.

³⁹ Sheikh Saduq, *Ilal-u-Sharayi'*, vol. 4, p. 399.

⁴⁰ Sheikh Saduq, *'Uyun Akhbar-u-Rida*, vol. 1, p. 28.

⁴¹ Ibid. p.71.

5. Imam Hadi said in *Ziyarah Jami'ah*, "For you, there is imperative devotion, high status, and an accepted intercession."⁴²

Sunni Hadiths on Intercession

In Sunni hadith collections, there are tens of hadiths that accept intercession and elaborate on its conditions:

1. Ahmad Hanbal (d. 241 A.H.) narrated from the four Sunni Imams, who quoted the Prophet as saying, "My intercession goes to the one who testifies to the unity of God sincerely, and his heart confirms his words and vice versa."⁴³
2. The renowned Sunni hadith narrators, Muhammad ibn Isma'il Bukhari (d. 256 A.H.) and Muslim Neysaburi (d. 261 A.H.) narrated from the Prophet Muhammad in a slightly different version: "There is an answered prayer for every prophet, and God-willing I am going to reserve my answered prayer for interceding for my Ummah on the Day of Judgment."⁴⁴
3. The noted Sunni hadith narrator, Muhammad ibn Yazid Qazwini (d. 257 A.H.) gathered and included eleven narrations under the heading "Section of Intercession" in his book *Sunan of ibn Majah*. He narrated from the Prophet, "Verily my intercession will go to those from among my Ummah who have committed deadly sins."⁴⁵

⁴² Sheikh Saduq, *Man La Yahduruhul-Faqih*, vol.2, p.216.

⁴³ Ahmad Hanbal, *Musnad of Ahmad*, vol.2, p.307; also see vol.6, p.428, vol.3, p.9, and vol. 3, pp.50 &55.

⁴⁴ Bukhari, *Sahih of Bukhari*, vol. 8, p.192; also see Muslim Neishaburi, *Sahih of Muslim*, vol.1, p.131; and Muhammad ibn Yazid Qazwini, *Sunan of ibn Majah*, vol. 2, p.1440.

⁴⁵ Muhammad ibn Yazid Qazwini, *Sunan of ibn Majah*, vol. 2, p. 1441; also see Tirmidhi, *Sunan of Tirmidhi*, vol. 4, p.45.

He also quoted the Holy Prophet as saying: “On the Day of Judgment, I will be the leader and orator of the other prophets, and the intercessor among them.”⁴⁶

4. In his famous book “Sunan of Tirmidhi”, Muhammad ibn ‘Isa Tirmidhi (d. 279 A.H.) included some narrations under the heading “Intercession”, including a long hadith in which on the Day of Judgment, the troubled ones from previous peoples will come to the Prophet of Islam (S) and request intercession from him. Addressing the Prophet Muhammad (S), God will say,
 “O’ Muhammad (S)! raise your head, ask [for whatever you want] [because your request] will be granted, and intercede [because] your intercession [will be accepted].”⁴⁷
5. Another Sunni scholar, Ahmad ibn Shu‘aib Nisa’i (d. 303 A.H.), in his book *Sunan of Nisa’i* quoted the Holy Prophet as saying,
 “I have been granted five things which had not been given to anyone before...and I have been granted intercession.”⁴⁸

The Intercessors on the Day of Resurrection

Now that it has been proven that the Qur’an and hadiths underline intercession, we should specify whom God has granted this right.

1. The Prophets

What was mentioned before reveals that the great divine prophets are the intercessors on the Day of Judgment. Both Shi’a and Sunni hadith narrators report the following hadith from the Prophet,

On the Day of Judgment, prophets will intercede.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Muhammad ibn Yazid Qazwini, *Sunan of ibn Majah*, vol. 2, p. 1443.

⁴⁷ Tirmidhi, *Sunan of Tirmidhi*, vol. 4, p. 44; also see vol. 5, p. 247.

⁴⁸ Nisa’i, *Sunan of Nisa’i*, vol. 1, p. 210; also see vol. 2, p. 27.

2. *The Angels*

ولا يشفعون إلا لمن ارتضى وهم من خشيته مشفقون

*And they offer no intercession except for those who are acceptable, and they stand in awe and reverence of His [Glory].*⁵⁰

3. *Religious Scholars*

There are many hadiths that regard scholars as intercessors. For example, according to Imam Sadiq, “On the Day of Judgment, God will muster both worshippers and religious scholars. The worshipper will be told to enter Heaven, and the religious scholar will be told to intercede for people for training them well.”⁵¹

It is noteworthy to mention that based on the above hadith, the Imams are also entitled to intercede because according to both their followers and opponents they are the sources of Islamic knowledge.

4. *The Martyrs (or witnesses)*

The Prophet said, “On the Day of Resurrection, the prophets, then religious scholars, and after them martyrs (or witnesses) will intercede for people.”⁵²

Likewise, in other, albeit few, hadiths, some other people were introduced as intercessors. For example, ibn Abbas quoted the Prophet Muhammad as saying, “There are seven groups of people

⁴⁹ Muhammad ibn Yazid Qazwini, *Sunan of ibn Majah*, vol.2, p.724; also see Sayyid Humairi, *Qurb-ul-Asnad*, p. 64.

⁵⁰ *Anbiya*, 28.

⁵¹ Sheikh Saduq, *Ilal-u-Sharayi*, vol. 4, p.399.

⁵² Muhammad ibn Yazid Qazwini, *Sunan of ibn Majah*, vol.2, p. 724; also see Sayyid Humairi, *Qurb-ul-Asnad*, p. 64; also *Bihār anl-Anwār*, vol. 8, p. 34.

who, like prophets, can intercede: muezzins⁵³, Imams, martyrs (or witnesses), the bearers of the Qur'an (i.e. those who memorize it), scholars, students, and the repentant.⁵⁴

Response to the Doubts Cast on Intercession

As mentioned before, intercession, according to Shi'a and many Sunni scholars, means that on the Day of Judgment, some special servants of God will intercede for believers who sinned with permission of God, and as a result, the sinners will enter Heaven. This belief has long been held by the Shi'a, and some great Sunni scholars. However, in the 8th century A.H., it was questioned and denied by Ibn Taymiyyah. After him, in the 11th century A.H., Muhammad ibn 'Abdul-Wahhab followed in his footsteps and tried to disseminate Ibn Taymiyyah's notion. This has made intercession one of the points of disagreement between Wahhabism and other Islamic schools of thought.

Of course, it should be noted that they have not negated intercession in essence; rather, they similarly believe that on the Day of Judgment intercessors will intercede for sinners. However, they believe that firstly we should not ask them for intercession in this world and for the worldly matters; and secondly, although prophets can intercede, we cannot directly ask them for intercession. Instead, we must request God to let them intercede for us, and if somebody asks them directly for intercession, he becomes polytheist.⁵⁵

The Wahhabi Perspective

Wahhabis provide a number of arguments opposing the principle of intercession:

⁵³The chosen person at a mosque who recites the call to prayer (*adhan*)

⁵⁴ Abdul-Karim ibn Muhammad Sam'ani, *al-Ansab*, vol.5, p.623

⁵⁵ Ja'far Subhani, *Wahhabism* in al-Mizan, pp. 293, 294.

1. Requesting intercession is polytheistic

Wahhabis consider requesting intercession from intercessors polytheistic because it means a person invokes someone other than God. And if invoking somebody other than God is polytheism in worship, then so is asking intercessors for intercession. The reason for the second premise is this Qur'anic verse: "*So invoke not any one along with God.*"⁵⁶

Response

Polytheism is to worship somebody or something other than God. However, believers in intercession never intend to worship a deity when requesting intercession. In other words, invoking someone other than God in itself is neither prohibited nor polytheistic because if taking an action by somebody is legitimate, then so is asking him for that action. If we accept that intercession by intercessors is legitimate, then seeking intercession from them is also legitimate.

Indeed, if someone considers intercessors as being allowed to intercede without the permission of God, then he is a polytheist as it is our belief that no one can intercede without permission of God.

Pointing out the story of Prophet Joseph, the Qur'an approves of intercession. The Qur'an quotes the sinful offspring of Prophet Jacob as pleading:

قالوا يا ابانا استغفر لنا ذنوبنا انا كنا خاطئين

*They said: 'O' our father! Ask for us forgiveness for our sins, for we were truly at fault.'*⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Jinn, 18.

⁵⁷ Yusuf, 97.

2. *The polytheists' request for intercession from other than God is condemned*

Wahhabis maintain that in the Qur'an, God, the Almighty condemned the polytheists in the early Islam, who sought help from other than God:

و يعبدون من دون الله ما لا يضرهم و لا ينفعهم و يقولون هولاء شفعاؤنا
عند الله

*They worship, besides God, things that hurt them not nor profit them, and they say: 'These are our intercessors with God.'*⁵⁸

Since the Shi'as also request intercession from other than God, the Qur'an condemns them, too.

Response

Polytheists are rebuked and condemned because 1) they worship something other than God, and 2) they contend these deities can intercede, while God does not grant such a right to their deities.

In other words, they were rebuked for worshipping something other than God and considering false deities as intercessors. However, we maintain that 1) worshipping something other than God is not permissible, and 2) we regard intercession as belonging essentially to God, who has permitted some of His elite servants to intercede with His permission; and 3) our intercessors comprise of the select servants of God.

⁵⁸ *Yunus*, 18.

Therefore, there is no common ground between the Shi'a view of intercession and that of the polytheists. Indeed, it can be argued that the very idea of requesting intercession from good servants of God and with the permission of God is an embodiment of the unity of God.

3. Intercession is exclusive to God

The Wahhabis contend that based on the following Qur'anic verse, intercession is exclusive to God:

قل لله الشفاعة جميعا

Say: To God belongs exclusively [the right to grant] intercession.⁵⁹

Hence, belief in intercession by some other than God is opposed to the Qur'anic.

Response

The above-mentioned discussion indicates that intercession, in that it influences the destiny of man, is a manifestation of the divinity of God, and it primarily and essentially belongs to God. However, this is not in contrast with the belief in intercession because believers in intercession stress that intercessors cannot intercede independently, thus again it is God, Who manages the affairs.

4. It is futile to ask the dead for intercession

According to Wahhabis, seeking intercession is a kind of prayer, but intercession from the dead is futile, because they are in Barzakh

⁵⁹ Zumar, 44.

(Purgatory) and are not alive. It is also argued that the Quran stresses that the dead cannot hear anything:

انك لاتسمع الموتى و لاتسمع الصم الدعاء اذا ولّوا مدبرين

*Truly you cannot cause the dead to listen, nor can you cause the deaf to hear the call, when they turn back in retreat.*⁶⁰

Through this verse, God referred to the polytheists who were reluctant to accept the words of the Prophet; comparing them to the dead indicates that both polytheists and the dead cannot understand anything and nothing can be requested from them.

Although Wahhabis accuse other Islamic sects of polytheism in order to impugn them, they have acted differently in presenting this argument. In response, it can be argued that when the soul leaves the body, the latter can no longer be addressed because it has lost its perception and consciousness. In the above verse, God intended to convey the same meaning. The polytheists, albeit alive outwardly, are lifeless; they are akin to a dead body because they do not understand anything.

When we ask the Messenger of God for intercession, we do not ask of his body; rather, we believe that his essence – or his soul - is still alive, because God said about martyrs in the Holy Quran:

ولا تحسبن الذين قتلوا في سبيل الله امواتا بل احياء عند ربهم يرزقون

*Think not of those who are slain in God's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord.*⁶¹

⁶⁰ Naml, 80.

If martyrs are alive, then the Prophet must also be alive and aware of our please for intercession.⁶²

Conclusion

Intercession with the permission of God – a Qur’anic teaching held by most Islamic schools of thought – is in accordance with the noble Quran and confirmed by hadiths. Likewise, doubts cast by those who negate intercession can never be proved and justified.

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⁶¹ *Ale-Imran*, 169.

⁶² In this part, the author made use of the book *Wahhabism* by Ayatollah Subhani as well as the book *Salafism and Response to Doubts* by Ali Asghar Halabi.

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