

The Engagement of the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt (as) and Their Shi'a with the Qur'an and It's Sciences

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Abstract

This study examines the profound engagement of the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt (as) and their Shi'a followers with the Qur'an and its sciences, tracing their intellectual and spiritual contributions from the formative centuries of Islam to the contemporary era. The research highlights how Shi'a scholarship developed a comprehensive approach to Qur'anic studies—spanning exegesis (*tafsīr*), recitation (*qirā'āt*), grammar, rhetoric, abrogation (*nāsikh wa'l-mansūkh*), and the study of revelation contexts (*asbāb al-nuzūl*)—while maintaining a firm theological commitment to the Qur'an's authenticity and divine preservation. The article situates the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt (as) as divinely guided interpreters whose teachings form the cornerstone of Shi'a Qur'anic understanding. By exploring both historical narratives—such as Imam 'Alī's compilation of the Qur'an—and doctrinal positions—such as the rejection of *tahrīf* (textual alteration)—the study underscores the distinctive yet integrative character of Shi'a engagement with the Qur'an. It concludes that Shi'a contributions have significantly enriched the broader field of Qur'anic sciences, offering unique hermeneutical, linguistic, and spiritual insights that continue to influence Islamic thought.

Keywords: Imamate, Ahl al-Bayt (as), Qur'anic Sciences, Shia, Twelver Shia.

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Introduction

Qur'ānic studies, known in Arabic as *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, represent a comprehensive field dedicated to the academic investigation of the central religious text of Islam. This discipline extends beyond the mere interpretation of the Qur'ānic verses (*Tafsīr*) to encompass a diverse array of sciences that explore its various facets. These sciences employ a multitude of methodologies, drawing from fields such as philology, textual criticism, lexicography, codicology, literary criticism, and historical analysis. The primary objectives of *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* include understanding the original meaning of the Qur'ān, tracing its history of revelation, and examining the processes involved in its recording and transmission. This field also delves into the reception of the Qur'ān throughout history and appreciates its literary qualities independent of its religious significance.

Within this broad academic landscape, *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* acts as a detailed index to the numerous branches of learning connected to the Qur'ān, encompassing subjects like *Tajwīd*, *Qirā'āt*, and the study of abrogation (*al-Nāsikh wa'l-Mansūkh*). The development of *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* as a distinct religious science involved the establishment of a structured curriculum that systematically addressed topics such as the history of the Qur'ān's revelation, the distinction between its Makkan and Madinan portions, the processes of its compilation and reduction to writing, the existence of variant recitations, and its unique stylistic features. The nomenclature of the field as 'sciences' (*'Ulūm*) of the Qur'ān underscores the multiplicity of branches of learning it incorporates.

Problem Statement and Significance

Shi'a are often accused of not caring for the Holy Qur'ān, nor giving it and its sciences special attention. They are even accused of claiming that the circulated Qur'ān has been distorted and of not considering it a source for legislation. It was therefore necessary to examine the heritage of the Shi'a and the teachings of Ahl al-Bayt (as) in this field to demonstrate the contrary.

While books and academic papers have been written on this subject, a researcher may find it difficult to access them due to their dispersion across various works. Furthermore, some writings have overlooked specific areas relevant to this study or have failed to present them within a connected framework that highlights the intended outcome of this research.

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, relying on classical and contemporary Shi'a sources. It traces historical developments and analyzes scholarly arguments to demonstrate Shi'a engagement with the Qur'an and its sciences.



1. The Qur'ān in Shi'a Intellectual and Theological Tradition

1.1 Centrality of the Qur'ān in Shi'a Theology, Law, and Ethics

Qur'ānic studies hold a position of paramount importance within Shi'a intellectual thought, permeating every aspect of its theological, legal, ethical, and spiritual framework. In Shi'a theology (*Uṣūl al-Dīn*), the Qur'ān is revered as the ultimate source of divine knowledge, providing the foundational principles for understanding Tawḥīd, prophethood, resurrection, divine justice, and the Imamate. Shi'a theologians consistently refer to Qur'ānic verses when establishing and elaborating upon these core beliefs (al-Ṣadr, 1996: 48).

In Shi'a jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), the Qur'ān serves as the primary source of legal rulings and as the ultimate criterion for evaluating the authenticity of *Ḥadīth*. Any narration contradicting the clear meaning of the Qur'ān is deemed invalid. The Qur'ān outlines the general principles of Islamic law, which are then further clarified through the Sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh) and the Imāms (as), alongside rational reasoning (*'aql*) (al-Muẓaffar, 1984: 53).

The Qur'ān also shapes Shi'a ethics (*Akhlāq*) and spirituality (*'Irfān*). It is viewed as a guide for both moral formation and spiritual purification. Shi'a tradition holds that the Qur'ān contains exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) meanings, revealed more fully through the teachings of the Imāms. The concept of *ta'wīl* provides access to deeper symbolic interpretations of the text, supporting spiritual growth and insight (Makārim al-Shīrāzī, n.d.: 29).

Ultimately, in Shi'a thought, the Qur'ān stands as the supreme authority by which all other forms of knowledge are measured. The teachings and interpretations of the Ahl al-Bayt (as) are considered paramount because of their divinely guided and comprehensive understanding of the Qur'ān (al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1352 AH: 11–12).

1.2 Role of the Imāms of Ahl al-Bayt in Shaping Qur'ānic Understanding

Shi'a Islam possesses a rich scholarly tradition rooted in the profound reverence for the Ahl al-Bayt—the family of the Prophet—who are regarded as divinely guided leaders and authoritative interpreters of Qur'ānic revelation (al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1352 AH: 11–12). Their teachings form the core of the Shi'a hermeneutical approach, influencing tafsir, jurisprudence, theology, and spiritual exegesis.

The Shi'a perspective emphasizes that the Imāms inherited comprehensive knowledge of the Qur'ān, including its apparent and inner meanings, its historical context, and the divine wisdom underlying its legislation (al-Baḥrānī, 2006: 7–13). Narrations from the Imāms provided



early interpretive foundations that shaped the development of Shi'a Qur'anic sciences.

Despite significant scholarly engagement, contributions of Shi'a scholars to Qur'anic sciences beyond tafsir have often been underrepresented in mainstream academic discourse—particularly in Western scholarship (Takim, 2016: 133–144). Recognizing these contributions is essential for understanding the historical evolution of Qur'anic studies and appreciating the diversity of intellectual traditions within Islam.

The structured nature of *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* makes it clear that Shi'a scholars have long engaged with its various sub-disciplines—including qira'at, grammar, rhetoric, abrogation, and *asbāb al-nuzūl*—offering insights that enrich the broader Islamic tradition.

2. Compilation, Preservation, and Authenticity of the Qur'ān in Shi'a Thought

2.1 Shi'a Perspectives on the Historical Compilation of the Qur'ān

A fundamental aspect of Shi'a understanding of Qur'anic history concerns its compilation and preservation. Unlike the prevailing Sunni tradition that attributes the primary compilation to the era of Caliph 'Uthmān, Shi'a scholars maintain that the Qur'ān was gathered and written during the lifetime of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) himself. This belief is supported by narrations in both Shi'a and Sunni sources indicating that the Qur'ān existed in written form prior to the Prophet's death (al-Ṭabarsī, 1995: 83).

Shi'a tradition also affirms that Imām 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib possessed a distinct codex of the Qur'ān that included additional contextual information—such as chronological order of revelation, occasions of revelation, and explanatory notes—while preserving the same textual content known to Muslims today (al-'Āmilī, 1992: 64). The emphasis on early compilation reinforces the Shi'a conviction in the Qur'ān's completeness, divine authority, and uninterrupted preservation.

2.2 The Codex of Imām 'Alī: Features and Significance

Following the Prophet's passing, Shi'a narrations describe Imām 'Alī undertaking the task of compiling the Qur'ān into a single codex (al-Majlisī, 1982: 92). This compilation reportedly took six months and was arranged according to the chronological order of revelation—Makkī chapters preceding Madīnī ones. It also included contextual details such as *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation), Prophetic explanations, and information regarding abrogating and abrogated verses (Rāmyār, 1990: 370–371).



Shi'a sources report that Imām 'Alī presented this codex to the Muslim community, though it was not officially adopted. Instead, it remained preserved by the Imāms as a sacred trust and a comprehensive record of revelation (al-Majlisī, 1982: 40–48). While the textual content was identical to the standard Qur'ān, the supplementary historical and exegetical elements made his codex unique and valuable for understanding the Qur'ān's interpretive depth.

2.3 The Question of Tahrīf: Historical Debates and Scholarly Consensus

Despite the significance attributed to Imām 'Alī's compilation, Shi'a scholars across history—especially from the 4th century AH onward—have affirmed that the Qur'ān used today is complete and identical to the text revealed to Prophet Mohammad (pbuh). Prominent scholars such as Shaykh al-Ṣadūq, al-Murtada, al-Ṭūsī, and later al-Khoei explicitly rejected the notion of textual alteration (tahrīf) (al-Khu'ī, 1997: 195–257).

Although a minority of early Shi'a scholars cited narrations suggesting omissions or changes, this view gradually diminished as the school's methodological principles matured, emphasizing the Qur'ān's divine preservation¹. Contemporary Shi'a scholarship overwhelmingly upholds the Qur'ān's authenticity, often citing the verse: “Indeed, We have sent down the Reminder, and indeed We will preserve it” (Q 15:9).

Thus, the Shi'a consensus firmly aligns with the belief in the Qur'ān's textual integrity, reinforcing unity with the broader Muslim community and affirming the Qur'ān as the unaltered foundation for theology, law, and spiritual guidance.

3. Shi'a Contributions to Qur'ānic Sciences

3.1 Development of Tafsīr in Shi'a Islam

The history of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) in Shi'a Islam begins with Imām 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (as), regarded as the most knowledgeable interpreter of the Qur'ān after the Prophet (pbuh). According to Shi'a tradition, Imām 'Alī possessed comprehensive knowledge of the Qur'ān, including its esoteric meanings, its circumstances of revelation, and its legal implications. His teachings formed the earliest interpretive foundations for the Shi'a approach to the Qur'ān (Nekonām, 2016: 167–178).

The Imāms who succeeded him—particularly Imām Zayn al-'Ābidīn, Imām Moḥammad al-Bāqir, and Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (as)—played a

1. For example: Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (Ibn Babawayh) (d.381 AH), a prominent Shia scholar of the 4th century, explicitly articulated this belief as a core tenet of Imami Shia doctrine in his seminal work *al-I'tiqadat* (al-Ṣadūq, 1414 AH). Similarly, Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'ī (d.1413 AH), a highly influential 20th-century Shia authority, also firmly refuted any claims of alteration or deficiency in the present Quran (al-Khu'ī, 1418, Vol. 50, pp. 195-257).



pivotal role in developing Shi'a *tafsīr*. Their companions documented extensive exegetical narrations, which later scholars transmitted and organized (al-Mūsawī, 2000: 9–11). Early written *tafsīr* works include:

- *Tafsīr al-Qummī* by 'Alī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. 329 AH)
- *Tafsīr al-'Ayyāshī* by Moḥammad ibn Mas'ūd al-'Ayyāshī (d. 320 AH)

These commentaries relied primarily on transmitted narrations (*riwāyāt*) from the Prophet and the Imāms. The classical period introduced more systematic and scholarly *tafsīr* works, most notably:

- *Al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* by Shaykh al-Ṭūsī (385–460 AH)
- *Majma' al-Bayān* by Shaykh al-Ṭabrisī (468–548 AH)

These works incorporated linguistic analysis, theological reasoning, and comparative interpretation. In the modern era, Shi'a *tafsīr* expanded methodologically and philosophically, producing monumental works such as:

- *Al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* by 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1402 AH)
- *Tafsīr Nemooneh* by Nāser Makārem Shirāzi
- *Tafsīr Tasnīm* by Ayatollah Javādi Amoli

3.2 Contributions to *Qirā'āt* and *Tajwīd*

Shi'a scholars have played a significant role in the transmission and development of Qur'ānic recitation. One of the most influential canonical readers, 'Aṣim ibn Abī al-Najūd, whose recitation through Ḥafṣ is the most widespread today, is reported to have been associated with the Shi'a tradition. His teacher, Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, is said to have learned recitation directly from Imām 'Alī (as), placing the Imām at the root of one of the most widely practiced *qirā'āt* (al-Ṣadr, 1996: 346).

Another canonical reader, Abū 'Amr ibn al-'Alā', also had Shi'a affiliations (al-Ṣadr, 1996: 346). These early connections underscore the foundational role of Shi'a figures in shaping the oral transmission of the Qur'ān.

Shi'a scholarly positions on multiple recitations vary. While many acknowledge the legitimacy of widely transmitted *qirā'āt*, scholars such as Ayatollah al-Khoei argued that the Qur'ān was revealed in a single recitational form but that the Imāms permitted reciting according to the common canonical modes for the sake of communal unity (al-Khu'ī, 1997: 193).

3.3 *Al-Muḥkam wa'l-Mutashābih* in Shi'a Scholarship

The classification of Qur'ānic verses into *muḥkam* (clear, decisive) and *mutashābih* (ambiguous, allegorical) represents a fundamental hermeneutical principle in Islamic exegetical tradition. Shi'a scholarship has paid particular attention to this distinction because of its direct



implications for theology (*kalām*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and the interpretive authority of the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt. Discussions of Q 3:7 in classical tafsīr works—particularly those of al-Ṭūsī and al-Ṭabrisī—highlight the centrality of this division (al-Ṭabrisī, 1995: 47–48, under Q 3:7).

While Sunni and Shi'a exegetes both acknowledge the Qur'anic division found in Q 3:7, the Shi'a tradition offers a distinctive interpretive framework grounded in the teachings of the Imams, who are regarded as possessing authoritative knowledge of both the apparent (*ẓāhir*) and inner (*bāṭin*) meanings of revelation—a principle repeatedly emphasized in *al-Kāfi*, esp. in traditions explaining the role of *al-rāsikhūn fī al-'ilm* (al-Kulaynī, 1407 AH: 213–214).

Shi'a exegetes—especially al-Ṭabrisī—argue that ambiguity is not inherent but relative, becoming clear when examined through the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (al-Ṭabrisī, 1995: 48).

The Role of the Imams in Interpreting Ambiguous Verses

A defining feature of Shi'a hermeneutics is the belief that the Imams possess inherited knowledge of the Qur'an, including its obscure and symbolic dimensions. Their role as the *Qur'an al-nātiq* (“speaking Qur'an”) appears in traditions from Imām al-Bāqir and Imām al-Ṣādiq (al-Kulaynī, 1407 AH: 214–215).

Narrations describing the Imams as the uniquely qualified interpreters of *mutashābihāt* constitute a cornerstone of Shi'a epistemology, and they are cited consistently in classical works on doctrine, including al-Ṣadūq's *al-I'tiqādāt* (al-Ṣadūq, 1993: 92–95, on the Imams' interpretive authority).

This approach differs from Sunni hermeneutics, which rely primarily on linguistic analysis and contextual indicators, whereas Shi'a readings integrate transmitted esoteric knowledge alongside exoteric interpretive tools (al-Ṭūsī, 1996: 406).

3.3 Abrogation (*Nāsikh wa'l-Mansūkh*) and *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*

Shi'a scholarship includes early and systematic engagement with the study of abrogation. Shaykh al-Ṭūsī authored discussions on *nāsikh wa'l-mansūkh*, while 'Alī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī is also credited with a work on the subject (al-Khu'ī, 1997: 212). These efforts demonstrate that Shi'a scholars participated actively in identifying and analyzing abrogated verses according to their jurisprudential principles.

Shi'a theology frames abrogation as a function of divine wisdom and gradual legal development, not divine reconsideration. Al-Ṭūsī explicitly distinguishes legislative change from any alteration in divine knowledge (al-Ṭūsī, 1996: 13). Ma'rifah likewise clarifies the difference between *naskh* and *badā'*, emphasizing that abrogation pertains to outward rulings, not eternal divine realities (Ma'rifah, 2009: 269). This harmonizes with the



broader Imāmī commitment to coherence in revelation and the unity of God’s eternal will.

Regarding *asbāb al-nuzūl*, Shi‘a tradition maintains that Imām ‘Alī’s codex contained detailed contextual information about the circumstances of revelation. Furthermore, narrations transmitted through the Imāms provide essential insights into historical contexts (al-Bahrānī, 2006: 7–13). A notable Shi‘a contribution to this field is the work of Ibn Shahrāshūb (d. 588 AH), who authored *Asbāb Nuzūl al-Qur‘ān*, emphasizing the role of Ahl al-Bayt in understanding revelation (al-Khu‘ī, 1997: 354).

3.4 Early Shi‘a Foundations in Arabic Grammar and Rhetoric

A central Shi‘a contribution to Qur’ānic sciences lies in the development of Arabic linguistic tools. Imām ‘Alī (as) is widely regarded as the founder of Arabic grammar (*nahw*). He taught the foundational principles—such as the classification of speech into noun, verb, and particle—to Abū al-Aswad al-Du‘alī.

Abū al-Aswad, following Imām ‘Alī’s instruction, became the pioneer of Arabic grammar and introduced diacritical marks to the Arabic script. This innovation was crucial for preserving correct Qur’ānic recitation, particularly as Islam spread to non-Arab populations. His efforts paved the way for the Basran and Kufan grammatical schools (al-Ṣadr, 1996: 40–61).

3.5 Perspectives on Qur’ānic Inimitability (*I‘jāz*)

Shi‘a scholars have contributed extensively to the study of Qur’ānic inimitability. They argue that the Qur’ān’s eloquence, rhetorical power, internal consistency, depth of meaning, and transformative spiritual effect represents undeniable signs of its divine origin (al-Subḥānī, 2008: 243–339; Ma‘rifah, 2009: 103). Key figures include:

- Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413 AH), who authored a treatise on the miraculous nature of the Qur’ān.
- Sayyid al-Murtaḍā (d. 436 AH), who articulated and defended the theory of *ṣarfah*, proposing that humans are divinely prevented from producing a text like the Qur’ān.
- ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā‘ī (d. 1402 AH), who offered extensive philosophical reflections on *i‘jāz* in *al-Mīzān* and in a separate monograph.

Shi‘a perspectives on *i‘jāz* emphasize both form and meaning: the Qur’ān’s linguistic uniqueness and its profound spiritual and intellectual content (Ma‘rifah, 2009: 216).

4. Defense of the Qur’ān’s Integrity in Shi‘a Scholarship

4.1 Origins of Accusations Against Shi‘a Views on the Qur’ān

The Shi‘a community has historically faced accusations of believing in the alteration (*tahrīf*) of the Qur’ān. These claims, dating back to the second



century AH, allege that the Shi'a hold that the Qur'ān was distorted—typically through omissions concerning the succession of the Prophet or virtues of Imām 'Alī and Ahl al-Bayt (Kohlberg, 2009: 6). Such accusations often emerged during periods of political or sectarian conflict and were used to delegitimize Shi'a beliefs.

Some studies have also noted that certain Shi'a figures were associated with views implying textual alteration, often due to their acceptance of weak narrations or polemical sources (al-Jazā'irī, 2008: 257–258). However, these historical references must be contextualized within broader intra-Muslim intellectual disputes and the evolution of Shi'a doctrinal principles.

4.2 Theological and Scholarly Refutations Across Generations

Shi'a scholars across centuries have firmly rejected the notion of Qur'ānic alteration and emphasized their belief in the complete, preserved Qur'ān used by all Muslims today. Prominent examples include:

- Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (d. 381 AH) — who explicitly stated in *al-ʿIṭiqādāt* that the Qur'ān is intact and unaltered, and that any claim of distortion is false (al-Ṣadūq, 1993: 83–86).
- Sayyid al-Murtaḍā (d. 436 AH) — who argued that the certainty of the Qur'ān's preservation matches the certainty of well-known historical realities, dismissing *taḥrīf* allegations as misunderstandings or reliance on unreliable reports (al-Ṭabarsī, 1995: 83–84).
- Shaykh al-Ṭūsī (d. 460 AH) — who affirmed in *al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* that the Muslim community—Shi'a and Sunni—unanimously agrees on the absence of additions in the Qur'ān, and that the Shi'a school rejects any notion of omissions (al-Ṭūsī, 1996: 3).
- Ayatollah Abu al-Qāsim al-Khoei (d. 1413 AH) — who provided one of the most detailed rebuttals in modern scholarship through *al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, systematically dismantling every argument for *taḥrīf* and affirming the Qur'ān's integrity (al-Khu'ī, 1997: 195–257).

In their arguments, Shi'a scholars frequently invoke Qur'ānic verses such as: “Indeed, We sent down the Reminder, and indeed We will preserve it.” (Q 15:9)

They also highlight the principle that the Qur'ān is the ultimate criterion for assessing hadith authenticity—an approach incompatible with believing in its distortion. Collectively, these theological and scholarly refutations demonstrate a consistent and overwhelming Shi'a consensus affirming the Qur'ān's textual preservation and integrity.



Conclusion

The Qur'ān has always occupied a central position in the intellectual and spiritual life of Shi'a Islam, shaping its theology, jurisprudence, and mystical traditions. The Imāms of Ahl al-Bayt (as) and their followers approached the Qur'ān not merely as a sacred text, but as a living source of divine guidance whose meanings unfold through both exoteric and esoteric dimensions.

From Imām 'Alī's early efforts in the Qur'ān's compilation and linguistic codification to the elaborate exegetical traditions of later scholars such as al-Ṭūsī, al-Ṭabrisī, and 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Shi'a engagement with the Qur'ān reflects an unbroken continuum of scholarship rooted in reverence, reason, and transmitted knowledge. This tradition has consistently emphasized the Qur'ān's role as the ultimate criterion of truth, shaping Shi'a approaches to theology, law, ethics, and spirituality.

Furthermore, the strong and repeated affirmation of the Qur'ān's textual integrity within Shi'a doctrine demonstrates a deep commitment to the unity of the Muslim community while preserving the distinctive interpretive legacy of the Ahl al-Bayt. Shi'a scholars, both early and contemporary, have rigorously confronted and refuted accusations of taḥrīf, reaffirming the Qur'ān as complete, preserved, and authoritative.

The cumulative contributions of Shi'a scholarship to Qur'ānic sciences—ranging from tafsīr and qirā'āt to grammar, abrogation, and theological reflection—represent an essential and enduring component of Islamic intellectual history. These contributions not only illuminate the richness of Shi'a engagement with the Qur'ān but also deepen the broader Muslim understanding of the divine message.



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