

# None Know except the Knowing: Ahl al-Bayt & their Knowledge of the Qur'an

*Tafsīr al-Şāfi is an exegetical work of the Qur'an by Muḥammad Muhsin al-Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d. 1090/1679). Al-Fayḍ al-Kāshānī was a prolific Imami Shi'i scholar who wrote about many of the various Islamic sciences, contributing in profound and lasting ways to the fields of Islamic mysticism, aḥādīth, and exegesis. He was a student and son-in-law of Mullā Şadrā al-Shīrāzī, the renowned Shi'i mystic-philosopher of the Safavid period.*

*In the introduction to his tafsīr, al-Kāshānī outlines in twelve parts his view on major issues relevant to the Qur'an and the Qur'anic sciences. He presents his views primarily through culling a set of aḥādīth, along with his commentary on those aḥādīth. Below is a translation of the second part of this introduction, where the author presents a number of aḥādīth that demonstrate the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt are the exclusive possessors of the totality of Qur'anic knowledge. The Qur'an says that there are "manifest signs in the breasts of those who have been given knowledge," ((Qur'an, Ṭāhā (20):49.)) and orders people to, "ask the People of Remembrance, if you do not know." ((Qur'an, al-Naḥl (16):43.)) Only the Ahl al-Bayt, the author argues, have access to every level of Qur'anic meaning. While the Qur'an is approachable at a basic level for all readers, those who wish to gain insights beyond the apparent meanings of the sacred text must seek out the knowledge proffered by the Imams, a requirement that is rooted in the Qur'an itself. The final narrations quoted by al-Kāshānī showcase the error of those who took recourse to their own personal opinion when interpreting the Qur'an's apparent meaning, or attempting to go beyond it. The implication is therefore salvific: reliance on the authority of the Imams for seeking greater depth in Qur'anic knowledge is an indispensable part of exegesis that mitigates the harms of conjecture or personal opinion.*

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## On True and Complete Qur'anic Knowledge Being the Domain of Ahl al-Bayt

Muḥammad ibn Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī reports in *al-Kāfī*, through his chain of narrators that ends with Sulaym ibn Qays al-Hilālī, that the latter heard the Commander of the Faithful, Imam 'Alī ('a), say:

"... Not a verse (of the Qur'an) was revealed to the Messenger of Allah (ṣ) except that he recited and dictated it to me. I would then write it down by my own hand. He taught me its *ta'wīl* and *tafsīr*, ((*Ta'wīl* is a technical term that is translated here as the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'anic text. It refers primarily to meanings of Qur'anic statements that are beyond, yet in consonance with, the surface-level meaning of the text. Such meanings are accessible to only a chosen few who are endowed by Allah with such knowledge. The contrasting technical term *tafsīr* is translated here as the exoteric or apparent meaning of the words of the Qur'an, which is accessible at varying degrees to normal people.)) its *nāsikh* and *mansūkh*, ((These two technical terms refer to the idea that some commandments mentioned in the Qur'anic text were later abrogated. The *nāsikh* refers to a new commandment which abrogates the *mansūkh*, an outdated commandment. The nature of this abrogation is understood differently by various

schools of Qur'anic interpretation and Islamic law. The Imami Shi'i school formulated an understanding of abrogation that recognized the eternal knowledge and wisdom of God, without any implication of God "changing His mind." They argue that it is not God who has changed, but rather a new set of circumstances has appeared in the world warranting the appropriateness of different laws. The so-called "new" laws would not be new per-se, nor would "old" laws be outdated. Rather, all such laws are legislated by God in a way that makes them limited to the contexts defined by the laws themselves.))its *muḥkam* and *mutashābih*.((The technical terms mentioned here refer to an interpretive process where "clearer" statements (*muḥkam*) of the Qur'anic text are to be used to clarify other, more ambiguous or enigmatic statements (*mutashābih*). *Muḥkam* is sometimes translated as decisive and *mutashābih* as ambiguous, although some scholars argue that such translations are oversimplifications since every statement of the text has degrees of clarity.))He prayed to Allah that He teach me the understanding of the Qur'an and its preservation. Thereafter, I did not forget a single verse he dictated to me, or any other knowledge he transmitted to me. And ever since that prayer of the Prophet, I wrote all that he dictated. [The Prophet] taught me all that God taught him, and he did not omit any of it, whether of the lawful or the unlawful, of Allah's commandments or prohibitions—from the past or the future—or of the testaments revealed to anyone before him regarding worship or sin; and I memorized all of it. In order that I not forget a single letter of the Book, he placed his hand upon my chest and prayed to Allah that He fill my heart with knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and light. I said to him, 'O Messenger of Allah, may my father and mother be ransomed for your sake. Ever since you called upon Allah for my sake, I have not forgotten anything, nor lost anything I did not write. Do you fear I may forget in the future?' The Prophet replied to me, 'I do not fear forgetfulness or ignorance on your part.')(( The reader should note that this is an excerpt from a larger hadith. For the full hadith, see *al-Kāfī*, vol. 1 (Qumm: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1407 A.H.), hadith #1, p. 64.))

Al-'Ayyāshī also narrates this hadith in his *tafsīr*.((Muḥammad ibn Mas'ūd al-'Ayyāshī, *Tafsīr al-Ayyāshī*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Maktabat al-'Ilmiyyah al-Islāmiyyah, 1380 A.H.), p. 253.))

Al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq,((This is the epithet given to Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī, an early and pivotal Shi'i scholar whose work *Man lā Yaḥduruh al-Faqīh* is canonical within the Shi'i hadith corpus.))in his book *Ikmāl al-Dīn*, narrates the above hadith with minor variations. His narration ends with the following:

"The Prophet (ﷺ) then said, 'My Lord has answered my prayer regarding you, 'Alī, and regarding your associates who will be after you.' I asked, 'O Messenger of Allah, who are my associates who will come after me?' The Prophet said, 'Those who Allah has joined to Himself and to me.' He then recited the verse, 'Obey Allah. And obey the Messenger and the Possessors of Authority among you.'((Qur'an, *al-Nisā'* (4): 59.))I asked, 'Who are these people (who possess authority)?' The Prophet replied, 'My *awṣiyā'*,((The Arabic word *waṣī* (pl. *awṣiyā'*) refers linguistically to one who is authorized to execute a command on behalf of another. In its technical meaning, the Imam appears to be referring to those commissioned by the Prophet on behalf of Allah to interpret and teach the authoritative meanings of the Qur'an, that is, the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt. It will hereafter be translated as executor.))who will meet me at the Heavenly Cistern.((This is a translation of the word *kawthar*, a term used in the Qur'an. It refers to a cistern in paradise.))All are guided, and all are guides. None who forsakes them does them harm. They

are with the Qur'an, and the Qur'an with them; neither does it separate from them, nor do they separate from it. My ummah is given succor through them. Calamity is averted from my ummah through them. It receives rain and its prayers are answered because of them.' I then asked, 'O Messenger of Allah, name them for me.' The Prophet then placed his hand upon the head of Ḥasan ('a) and said 'This son of mine.' He then placed his hand upon the head of Ḥusayn ('a) and said, 'Then, this son of mine. And his son after him, called 'Alī. He will be born in your lifetime, so send him my greetings. Then the remaining twelve from the progeny of Muḥammad.' I said, 'May my father and mother be ransomed for your sake. Name them for me.' The Prophet then named them, one after another. By Allah, O brother of the Hilāl tribe, ((Here, Imam 'Ali is referring to Sulaym ibn Qays al-Hilālī, the narrator of this hadith.)) the Prophet named among them the Maḥdī, the Guided one of the ummah of Muḥammad, who will fill the land with justice and fairness, just as it was filled with injustice and oppression. By Allah, I know who will pledge allegiance to him, between the *rukṅ* and *maqām*. ((The terms *rukṅ* and *maqām* refer to two important markers in *Masjid al-Harām*, the former being the southern corner of the Ka'bah, and the latter being the "Station of Ibrahim," which is opposite the *rukṅ*. In other words, the Imam will be standing in front of the Ka'bah.)) And I know the names of their forefathers and their tribes.'" ((Al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa-Tamām al-Ni'mah*, vol. 1 (Tehran: al-Islāmiyyah, 1395 A.H.), hadith #37, p. 284-5.))

In *al-Kāfī*, al-Kulaynī narrates through his chain of transmission from Abū Ja'far (Imam al-Bāqir, 'a), who stated:

"Only a liar will claim to have collected the entire Qur'an as it was revealed [other than the Ahl al-Bayt.] None have compiled, memorized, and preserved [the Qur'an] exactly as Allah revealed except for 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the Imams after him." ((Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 1, hadith #1, p. 228.))

Al-Kulaynī narrates another hadith with his chain of transmitters from Imam al-Bāqir ('a), stating, "No one can claim that he has the entirety of the Qur'an—with its outer and its inner aspects—except the Executors (of the Prophet's trust, that is, the *awṣiyā'*).'" ((Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 1, hadith #2, p. 228.))

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Al-Kulaynī narrates yet another hadith with a particular chain from Imam al-Ṣādiq ('a), who comments on the following verse: "Such are clear signs in the breasts of those who possess knowledge..." ((Qur'an, *al-Ankabūt* (29):49.)) stating, "They are the Imams." ((Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 1, hadith #2, p. 214.))

He also narrates the following from Imam al-Ṣādiq, who says: "The Prophet of Allah is my forefather, and I have the knowledge of the Book of Allah. It contains the origin of creation and all that will exist until the Day of Judgment. It contains news of the heavens and the earth, news of Paradise and Hellfire, of what was and what will be. I know this as clearly as I see the palm of my own hand. Certainly, Allah has said 'Within it is an explanation of all things.' ((Qur'an, *al-Naḥl* (16):89.))" ((Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 1, hadith #8, p. 61.))

I [al-Kāshānī] can say the following about this hadith: The birth referred to here could entail both bodily and spiritual birth. After all, the [Imam's] knowledge refers back to [the Prophet], just as his lineage traces back to him. The Imam inherits the Prophet's knowledge, just as he inherits his wealth. Hence, the Imam can state, "I know the the Book of Allah. It contains such and such," by which he means, "I know the Qur'an in its entirety."

Al-Kulaynī cites the following hadith from Imam al-Ṣādiq (‘a): "The book of Allah contains news and tidings of what was before you and of what will come, and it details what is now among you. And we [Ahl al-Bayt] know this, and we understand it."((Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 1, hadith #9, p. 61.)) Imam al-Ṣādiq (‘a) also said, "We are those firmly rooted in knowledge. We are those who know the deeper meanings [of the Qur'an]."(A reference to Qur'an, *Āl ‘Imrān* (3):8.))((Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 1, hadith #1, p. 213.))

*Tafsīr al-Ayyāshī* narrates the following hadith from Imam al-Ṣādiq (‘a): "We are the Ahl al-Bayt. Allah will never stop sending from among us those who know His Book from its beginning to its very end. We know what Allah deems lawful, and what is forbidden. That which we must conceal, we do not disclose to anyone."((Al-‘Ayyāshī, *Tafsīr al-Ayyāshī*, vol. 1, p. 16.))

Another hadith states: "Among the knowledge given to us is the explanation of the Qur'an, its decrees, and its wisdom. If we could find worthy vessels and a reprieve [from persecution] (*wi‘ā’ aw mustarāḥ*), then we would disclose it. And we [always] seek the help of Allah."((Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan al-Ṣaffār, *Basā‘ir al-Darajāt fī Faḍā’il Āl Muḥammad*, vol. 1 (Qumm: Maktabat Āyatullah al-Mar‘ashī al-Najafī, 1404 A.H.), hadith #1, p. 214.))

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The following is narrated from Imam al-Ṣādiq (‘a): "Allah made the Ahl al-Bayt's *wilāyah*((*Wilāyah* is a term which linguistically refers to a relationship of adoration, closeness, and obedience that may exist between people. In its technical meaning, it refers to the devotion and obedience due to the Prophet and his select family.))the axis of the Qur'an and all (other sacred) texts, such that the apparent meanings (*muḥkam*) of the Qur'an revolve around it. Such texts are elevated by it, and true belief is clarified through it. The Messenger of Allah commanded that the Qur'an and the Family of Muḥammad be emulated. Thus, he [the Prophet] proclaimed in his final sermon: 'I leave among you two weighty things: one is greater, and the other less so. As for the greater, it is the Book of my Lord. As for the other, it is my family, the Ahl al-Bayt. Keep my memory [alive] in both. So long as you hold fast to them, never will you go astray.'"((Al-‘Ayyāshī, *Tafsīr al-‘Ayyāshī*, vol. 1, p. 5.))

In *al-Kāfī*, al-Kulaynī narrates a hadith from Imam al-Bāqir (‘a) through his chain that ends with Zayd al-Shahhām. An individual named Qatāda bin Dī‘āma had come to the Imam. The Imam said, "O Qatāda, are you the jurist of the people of Baṣrah?" Qatāda said, "They presume so." The Imam said, "I have heard that you explain the Qur'an?" Qatāda respond, "Yes." So the Imam said, "Do you explain it

through knowledge or through ignorance?" Qatāda said, "No, rather through knowledge." The Imam continued, "Since you explain the Qur'an through knowledge, and if you really are who you claim you are, may I pose a question to you?" Qatāda said, "Ask." The Imam said, "Tell me about what Allah states in *Sūrat Saba'*: 'And We set, between them and the cities that We have blessed, cities apparent, and well We measured the journey between them: 'Journey among them by night and day in security!'"((Qur'an, *Saba'* (34):18.))Qatāda said, "This verse suggests that whoever leaves from his house with provisions, a camel, and licit funds by which he intends to reach The House of Allah, he will be safe until he returns to his home." The Imam responded, "I ask you, O Qatāda: Do you realize that a person may leave his house with provisions, a camel, and licit funds by which he intends to reach the House of Allah, but he is privateered on the way, his funds stolen, and is struck with such a calamity that he is (utterly) destroyed?" Qatāda said, "By Allah, yes I am aware." The Imam said, "Woe upon you, O Qatāda! If you explain the Qur'an of your own accord, you will lead yourself and others to destruction. And if you attempt to explain it through the opinions of other men, you will perish, and will cause others to perish as well. Woe upon you, O Qatāda! This verse says that whoever leaves his home with provisions, a camel, and licit funds, seeking this House (of Allah), [but also] knowing our right, his heart will incline towards us, just as Allah has declared: 'Our Lord, let them perform the prayer, and make the hearts of people yearn towards them.'((Qur'an, *Ibrāhīm* (14):37.))In this verse, Prophet Ibrāhīm (ṣ) did not intend the House, otherwise he would have said, "...and make the hearts of people yearn towards it."((Imam al-Bāqir is stating that prayer of Prophet Ibrāhīm is not a plea to make people's hearts incline towards the Ka'bah, but rather the apparent meaning is to make their hearts incline to his descendants, which would include the family of the Prophet Mohammad as well. In other words, the verse is not referring to the house. Therefore he said, their hearts "yearn for *them*," and not "yearn for *it*." Thus, what is meant are a people—namely, *Ahl al-Bayt*—and not a particular place nor a particular building.))No, rather, it is we, by Allah, who are the plea and prayer of Ibrahim. Whoever has a heart that inclines towards us, his hajj is accepted; whoever does not, his hajj is not accepted. O Qatāda, when a person realizes this attribute within himself, then we will secure and protect him from the punishment of Hellfire on the Day of Judgement. Qatāda then said, "By Allah, I will not interpret the Qur'an except in this way!" The Imam said, "Woe upon you! O Qatāda, only he who is addressed by the Qur'an truly knows it."((Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, vol. 8, hadith #485, p. 311.))

This is how this hadith is found in the various recensions of *al-Kāfī*. However it seems some of the text may be missing, since there is no real connection between the statement of Qatāda and the verse. This verse actually demands an entirely different question, namely, "Which land is this verse referring to?" Qatāda's response is more appropriate for the verse: "And whosoever enters it is in security."((Qur'an, *Āl 'Imrān* (3):97.))This is also true of what the Imam states.

Another indicator of an omission here is a hadith of Imam al-Ṣādiq (‘a) found in '*Ilal al-Sharā'i'*. In this hadith, the Imam is narrated as having discussed these two verses, beginning by asking Abū Ḥanīfah, "Are you the jurist of the people of Iraq?" Abū Ḥanīfah responded, "Yes." The Imam then asked, "On what basis do you give legal rulings?" Abū Ḥanīfah said, "The Book of Allah and the sunnah of His Prophet." The Imam then asked, "Abū Ḥanīfah, do you know the Book of Allah as it was meant to be known? Do you know the difference between the verse that abrogates and the verse that is abrogated?"((Another reference to the technical terms, *nāsikh* and *mansūkh*.)Abū Ḥanīfah said, "Yes."

The Imam then responded, "Abū Ḥanīfah, you claim to have knowledge. Woe upon you! Allah did not give this knowledge [even] to the people of the sacred books to which he revealed. Woe upon you! Such knowledge is not given except to a select from among the descendants of our Prophet. I do not see you as even knowing a single word of the Book. If you are as you say you are, which you are not, then tell me: 'Travel within it, for nights and days, in safety...' ((Qur'an, *Saba'* (34):18.)) Where is this place?" Abū Ḥanīfah said, "I take it to be between Makkah and Madinah." The Imam turned to his companions and said, "You all know that people are sometimes robbed on the road between Makkah and Madinah such that their wealth is taken, and their lives in danger. They may [even] be killed." They responded, "Yes, indeed." Abū Ḥanīfah fell silent. The Imam said, "O Abū Ḥanīfah, tell me about the verse: 'Whoever enters it will be safe.' ((Qur'an, *Āl 'Imrān* (3):97.)) Where is this place?" Abū Ḥanīfah said, "The Ka'bah." The Imam responded, "Do you know that Ḥajjāj bin Yūsuf used ballistas against Ibn Zubayr, who was in the Ka'bah, and killed him. Was he safe therein?" Abū Ḥanīfah remained silent." ((Al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq, *'Ilal al-Sharā'i'*, vol. 1 (Qumm: Maktabat al-Dāwarī, 1427 A.H.), p. 89-91.)) The proper meaning of these verses will come in their respective locations later in the *tafsīr*, God-willing.

*This excerpt was translated by Azhar Sheraze of the Ahl al-Bayt Islamic Seminary.*