

1 | Fatima in Islamic Sacred Sources

Indeed, We have given you [*kauthar*] abundance. So, pray to your Lord, and [offer] sacrifice. Indeed, it is your enemy who is [*abtar*] without posterity.

—Q 108

This chapter draws from a selection of Qur'anic verses and excerpts from Islamic mystical literature to introduce Fatima, focusing on what she means to Muslims, especially Shi'a. First, we explore the historical contexts (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) of five verses based on commentaries by the early Sunni exegete Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923), the contemporary Shi'i exegete Muhammad Hussein al-Tabatabai (d. 1981), and secondary Shi'i exegetical sources. Then, we delve into her mystical and spiritual qualities in five epochs: pre-existence, her mother's womb, the physical world, the metaphysical realm, and the world hereafter.

Fatima in the Qur'an

Allegory presents a dynamic and transformative space for exploring the contextual and multifarious interpretative possibilities inherent within texts that may otherwise seem fixed and dogmatic. In retrieving Fatima's narrative embedded within the historical, esoteric, and allegorical readings of the Qur'an, we will see how al-Tabari and al-Tabatabai deploy allegory to extract numerous and varied interpretations from the text. This approach underscores the

malleability and fluidity of textual meaning, thereby emphasizing the importance of allegory as a tool for unlocking the full interpretative potential of sacred texts.

The Promise of Kauthar

The word *kauthar* appears only once in the Qur'an: "Indeed, We have given you [*kauthar*] abundance. So, pray to your Lord, and sacrifice [the sacrificial camel]. Indeed, it is your enemy who is [*abtar*] without posterity" (Q 108). Shi'a interpret *kauthar* as Fatima, the promised divine gift to the Prophet, restoring his hope for a lineage that would survive through his female heir. Both al-Tabari and al-Tabatabai state that when the Prophet lost his third son, 'Aas bin Wa'el mocked him by calling him *abtar*. In Meccan society, *abtar*, meaning amputee or defective, was a derogatory term hurled at men who did not bear sons. The Arabs looked upon an *abtar* with disdain because they believed that a man's lineage and legacy could only survive through male children. Thus, when 'Aas bin Wa'el called the Prophet *abtar*, God revealed *Kauthar* (Q 108) to console him by prophesying the succession of the Prophet's posterity over his adversaries.¹

Kauthar is a derivative of the root word, *kathara*, which means abundance.² After citing nearly fifty narrations, al-Tabari concludes that the *ta'wil* (interpretation) of *kauthar* is a river in Paradise that God has promised to the Prophet.³ Al-Tabatabai expands the meaning of *kauthar* as abundance granted to the Prophet to include his virtues, his progeny, his companions, the scholars among his followers, the stream in heaven, and more. Deploying

¹ Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil ay al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Markaz al-Buhuth wa Daraasaat al-Arabiyya wa-l-Islamiyya, 2001), Vol. 24: 698. Muhammad Husayn al-Tabatabai, *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Mu'assat al-'Alami li-l-Matbu'at, 1997), Vol. 20:372.

² Al-Tabatabai, *al-Mizan*, Vol. 20:429.

³ Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, Vol. 24:679–690.

his interpretive approach of utilizing the Qur'an to interpret the Qur'an, al-Tabatabai asserts that the word relation between *kauthar* and *abtar* is crucial to a holistic understanding of the verse.

Abtar is what the Arabs called a childless person; thus, it follows that God's reassurance to His Prophet must be in the form of glad tidings of abundant lineage. Two factors inform al-Tabatabai's preference: First, it is the closest in coherence with the last verse of the chapter, "Indeed, it is your enemy who is [*abtar*] without posterity," and second, without such an understanding, the grandeur of the Divine tidings of "Indeed We grant you (*Inna a'taynaka*)" would not bear weight. Al-Tabatabai concludes that *kauthar* is Fatima, the sole surviving child of the Prophet, because his lineage continued through her.⁴

Although both exegetes use the word '*ta'wil*' for their respective interpretations, their opposing conclusions may indicate a historical and sectarian reality. Al-Tabari's obscuring of "abundance of lineage" as a possible interpretation of *kauthar* may be his way of evading the Shi'i doctrine that Imamate is vested in the Prophet's progeny. Al-Tabatabai's deduction may be indicative of the Shi'a veneration of Fatima, not solely for being the daughter of the Prophet but for also for being the wife of Ali ibn Abi Talib (the first Imam of the Twelver Shi'i s) and the mother of the consecutive eleven Imams.

Interpreting *kauthar* as Fatima elevates her status in the Qur'an and facilitates the reading of female empowerment within the traditional Qur'anic exegesis. If Fatima is the promised *kauthar*, then the fact that her birth was celebrated instead of being shunned demonstrates the emergence of a cultural paradigm shift, one that privileges the right of a female infant to live and the inclusion and validation of matrilineal posterity. The words and actions of the Prophet demonstrated that shift.

Despite living in a society that detested daughters, the Prophet displayed immense love and respect for Fatima, much to the

⁴ Al-Tabatabai, *al-Mizan*, Vol. 20:430.

people's amazement. He would rise from his place whenever she visited him, kiss her hands, and offer her his seat.⁵ He proclaimed, "Fatimah is a part of me; whoever pleases her, pleases me and whoever hurts her, hurts me."⁶ Such public regard for a female was rare, even contrary to societal norms of the time. While constituting religious grounds for honoring women in general, the Prophet's conduct with Fatima raises a theological question about her status. Was this a demonstration of a father's love for his daughter or proof of Fatima's unique, theologically revered position? According to the Qur'an, the Prophet's words and actions are God's decree, and obedience to the Prophet is a sign of loving God.⁷ The Prophet's reverence for Fatima was more than a father's love for their child. It was ordained by God, thus attributing a sacred aspect to her.

Another radical impact of Fatima's existence was that it antagonized the prevalent notion that a person's lineage would continue solely through a surviving male heir. The Prophet disrupted that notion by declaring that Fatima's children were his own. Consequently, her children and grandchildren continued to trace their lineage back to the Prophet through their mother, alarming the pre-Islamic Meccan society and agitating the caliphal authorities for decades after the proclamation of Islam.

Once, the Abbasid caliph Harun questioned Imam al-Kazim (the fifth descendant of Fatima) about the laity referring to him as the son of the Prophet when the latter had no surviving male heir. Harun claimed that the Imam was wrong in ascribing his lineage to the Prophet and that he should instead call himself a descendant of Ali (Fatima's husband). Imam al-Kazim quoted Qur'anic verses emphasizing God's reference to Jesus as a descendant of Abraham

⁵ Abbas Qummi, *House of Sorrows* (Kitchener: Islamic Publishing House, 2010), 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷ "Nor does he [the Prophet] speak out of [his own] desire, it is [but] a revelation that is revealed [to him]," (Q 53:3,4) "... and you [Prophet] did not throw when you threw, rather it was Allah who threw," (Q 8:17) and "Say, 'If you love Allah, then follow me [the Prophet]; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins...'" (Q 3:31).

even though he was born as a miracle to the virgin Mary without a father.⁸ In the same way, he argued Fatima's children were, in fact, the Prophet's descendants.⁹

Fatima's birth and upbringing were the beginning of a significant, albeit unwelcomed, momentum for change in seventh-century Arabian society. She grew up to be a prolific theologian who championed the cause of women in the social and political arena.

Among the Abrār

Stemming from the root word *barr*, meaning "wide and expansive," *abrār* refers to pious and charitable individuals who act sincerely for God and facilitate widespread goodness.¹⁰ Al-Tabatabai elaborates that *birr* signifies an action of selfless piety such that the doer does not intend for the rewards to return solely to herself. She chooses to execute *birr* because it is a beautiful deed, even when its performance is difficult and uncomfortable.¹¹ One of the descriptions of the *abrār* in the Qur'an is as follows:

Indeed, the pious [*abrār*] will drink from a cup seasoned with *Kafur*, a spring where the servants of Allah drink, which they make to gush forth as they please. They fulfill their vows and fear a day whose ill will be widespread. They give food, for the love of Him, to the needy, the orphan, and the prisoner, [saying,] 'We feed you only for the sake of Allah. We do not want any reward from you nor any thanks.... [They will be told]: 'This is indeed your reward, and your endeavor has been well-appreciated.' (Q 76: 5–9, 22)

⁸ "And We gave him [Abraham] Isaac and Jacob ... and from his offspring, David and Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, and Aaron ... and Zechariah, John, Jesus and Ilyas ... and Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah and Lot, each We graced over all the nations" (Q 6:84–86).

⁹ Abu Mansur Ahmad al-Tabrisi, *al-Ihtijaj* (Najaf: Dar al-Nu'man li-l-Nashr, 1966), Vol. 2:164.

¹⁰ Nasser Makarim Shirazi, *Tafsir Namuneh* (Lahore: Misbah al-Qur'an Trust, 1990), Vol. 25:280.

¹¹ Al-Tabatabai, *al-Mizan*, Vol. 20:136.

An analysis of the historical context (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) of the above verse demonstrates Fatima's piety and selfless conduct, including her among the *abrār* in the Qur'an.

Drawing on several traditions, al-Tabari characterizes the *abrār* as a group of people who obey God, refrain from acts of disobedience, and feed the poor, the orphans, and the displaced captives. Without delving into the *asbāb al-nuzūl* of these verses, he concludes that *abrār* refers to a broad and general category of pious and practicing Muslims from the time of revelation and beyond.¹² Al-Tabatabai elaborates that *abrār* is a group of devout individuals who believe in God, the Prophet, and the Day of Judgment. They are committed to selfless servitude wanting only what their Lord desires. They act solely for His pleasure, prioritizing His will over their own and practicing patience to quell their wants out of love for His obedience. Their actions are motivated by sincerity, love, and submission to their Lord. Deploying his exegetical method of seeking an explanation of the Qur'an from within the Qur'an, al-Tabatabai provides two verses as evidence for his interpretation of the word *abrār*. The first verse states:

Piety [*ba(i)rr*] is not to turn your faces to the east or the west; rather, piety is [personified by] those who have faith in Allah and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets, and who give their wealth, for the love of Him, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler and the beggar, and for [the freeing of] the slaves, and maintain the prayer and give the zakat, and those who fulfill their covenants, when they pledge themselves, and those who are patient in stress and distress, and in the heat of battle. They are the ones who are true [to their covenant], and it is they who are the God wary. (Q 2:177)

This verse highlights key characteristics of the *abrār* as interpreted by al-Tabatabai: belief in God, the prophets, the Day of

¹² Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, Vol. 23:541–545.

Judgment, and pious and charitable conduct. He presents another set of verses which state, "No indeed! The record of the pious is in *'Illiyīn* [highest]. And what will show you what is *'Illiyūn*? It is a written record, witnessed by those brought near [to Allah]" (Q 83:18–21). Commenting on these verses, he includes a tradition attributed to Imam al-Sadiq,¹³ which states, "Allah, the High and Mighty created us [the progeny of the Prophet] from the highest of the highest [*a'lā al-'Illiyīn*] and created the hearts and bodies of our followers from the stuff of our creation. Therefore, their hearts always turn to us for we are all from the same source, and then he recited Q 83:18–21."¹⁴ This tradition, in all probability, references Fatima's mystical presence among the *'Illiyīn* (in the highest stations) before the world's creation. Later in this chapter, we will discuss more mystical references to Fatima.

After discussing the linguistic and the Qur'anic interpretations of *abrār*, al-Tabatabai provides the historical context (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) for the revelation of Q 76. Narrating Ibn Abbas, he states that when his grandsons Hasan and Hussain were taken ill, the Prophet suggested that Fatima and Ali make a covenant with God to fast for three consecutive days as a supplication for their children's health.¹⁵ Soon after, the children regained their health, and Fatima and Ali decided to fulfill their vow of fasting for three days. Some traditions narrate that their helper Fiḍḍa and the children also chose to fast.¹⁶

At nightfall on the first day of fasting, Fatima spread out five loaves of bread, salt, and water for *iftar*.¹⁷ As the family sat around their modest provisions, a destitute called out, "Peace be on you, O family of Muhammad! I am in need. Feed me so God may feed you from the delicacies of Paradise." Fatima gave her bread to the

¹³ Sixth holy Imam of the Twelver Shi'a.

¹⁴ Al-Tabatabai, *al-Mizan*, Vol. 20:361.

¹⁵ A similar narrative of making supplicatory covenants with God also appears in the narrative of the mother of Mary. See Q 3:35–38.

¹⁶ Al-Tabatabai, *al-Mizan*, Vol. 25:277.

¹⁷ *Iftar* is the meal with which Muslims break their fast after sunset.

beggar. Ali, Fidda, Hasan, and Hussain quickly followed suit. The beggar delightfully accepted the food, and Fatima and her family gave thanks for the opportunity to be of help. On the second day, an orphan called out to them for food as they sat down for iftar. Again, Fatima and her family gave away their loaves of bread to the orphan. At the end of the third day of fasting, a captive called out for help and once more gave away their food. The following day the Prophet visited Fatima and found her in a state of prostration while the signs of starvation were evident on her face. The Prophet applauded his family's selfless charity. Still, he could not help feeling saddened by their physical state of deprivation until the angel Gabriel descended with glad tidings. Gabriel announced that God had acknowledged their fulfilling their vow, feeding the needy, the orphan, and the captive out of love for Him and His creation and honored their pious and charitable conduct by documenting them in the verses of Q 76.¹⁸

Mahmud al-Alusi¹⁹ narrates a similar *asbāb al-nuzūl* for the revelation of Q 76 and argues that the entire chapter (Q 76) pays homage to Fatima's charitable actions. Besides announcing Fatima as a member of the *abrār*, al-Alusi points to another peculiar aspect of Q 76; even though this chapter provides one of the most vivid descriptions of Paradise, there is no mention of *ḥūr* (the beautiful and promised females of heaven). Instead, the verses of this chapter talk about the handsome young men that resemble scattered pearls as they tend to the dwellers of heaven, "They will be waited upon by immortal youths, whom, when you see them, you will suppose them to be scattered pearls" (Q 76:19). Al-Alusi suggests that this could be attributed to the profound reverence accorded to her as a woman and as the esteemed daughter of the Prophet.²⁰

¹⁸ Al-Tabatabai, *al-Mizan*, Vol. 20:145, 146.

¹⁹ Mahmud al-Alusi al-Baghdadi (d. 1854) was a nineteenth century Islamic Sunni scholar best known for his thirty-volume Qur'anic exegesis titled *Ruh al-Ma'ani fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim wa-l-Sab' al-Mathani*.

²⁰ Mahmud al-Alusi, *Ruh al-Ma'ani fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim wa al-Sab' al-Mathani* (Beirut: Dar a-Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, 2001), Vol. 29:158.

In his *Shawahid al-Tanzil li Qawa'id al-Tafdhil*, Hakim al-Haskani²¹ lists more than 200 references to the family of the Prophet in the Qur'an. As for the revelation of Q 76, al-Haskani posits that these verses were revealed in honor of Fatima's charitable actions, identifying her and her family as the *abrār*.²² Thus, the Qur'an portrays *abrār* as a group of individuals who possess unparalleled faith and exhibit exemplary behavior, thereby securing the most exalted positions in the hereafter owing to their contributions to humanity. While the category of *abrār* may encompass all devout Muslims, the specific reference in this context pertains to the acts of piety and charity performed by Fatima. The aforementioned verses not only highlight Fatima's elevated status among the *abrār* but also underscore the possibility of eliciting narratives of female piety through a more profound interpretation of the Qur'an's verses, particularly one grounded in allegory.

The "Verse of Light"

The most common theme in the Qur'an is the description of the transcendent nature of God without associating any imagery with the Divine.²³ Pure monotheistic belief in the singularity of God (*tawhīd*) is to deny all likeness to Him; "The originator of the heavens and the earth, He made for you mates from your own selves, and mates of the cattle, by which means He multiplies you. Nothing is like Him, [nothing is like His likeness], and He is the All-hearing, the

²¹ Hakim al-Haskani was an eleventh-century Persian Sunni scholar of Qur'anic exegesis and hadith. *Shawahid al-Tanzil li Qawa'id al-Tafdhil fi al-Ayaat al-Nazila fi Ahl al-Bayt Salawatullah wa Salamu Alayhim* is a collection of verses of the Qur'an that were revealed in demonstrating the virtues of the family of the Prophet.

²² Hakim al-Haskani, *Shawahid al-Tanzil li Qawa'id al-Tafdhil fi al-Ayaat al-Nazila fi Ahl al-Bayt Salawatullah wa Salamu Alayhim*, (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-'Alami li-l-Matbu'at, 2010), 302–315.

²³ "They make the jinn partners of Allah, though He has created them, and carve out sons and daughters for Him, without any knowledge. Immaculate is He and exalted above what they allege [concerning Him]!" (Q 6:100).

All-seeing” (Q 42:11). While this verse denies any likeness (*mathal*) to God, Q 24:35, popularly known as the “verse of light,” begins by describing the likeness of God’s Light (*mathalu nurih*). It states,

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche wherein is a lamp – the lamp is in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star – lit from a blessed olive tree, neither eastern nor western, whose oil almost lights up, though fire should not touch it – Light upon light. Allah guides to His Light whomever He wishes. Allah draws parables for [hu]mankind, and Allah has knowledge of all things. (Q 24:35)

According to this verse, the metaphor of God’s Light is a lamp placed in a niche. The lamp is in a glass that shines like a star. Its fuel is the oil of the blessed olive tree which is neither from the east nor the west. While the oil lights the lamp, the fire does not burn it. It emanates light upon light. The critical elements of this metaphor are the niche (*mishqat*), the lamp (*miṣbah*), the glass (*zujāja*), and the oil (*zayt*). Together, they appear as a shining star emanating layers of light (*nūrun ‘ala nur*). Muslim mystics, philosophers, and exegetes have interpreted this metaphor differently. Shi‘i allegorical traditions draw on the “verse of light” to describe Fatima’s essential contribution to propagating and establishing divine guidance.

For Ibn Arabi, this verse exhibits a transcendent unity essential to vision and perception “since, without light, [the] vision would perceive nothing at all.”²⁴ According to William Chittick, this verse manifests unity within diversity. Different colors emanate from one colorless light. Even though light has no color of its own, no color would exist without light.²⁵ In the words of Mujtaba Musavi Lari, this verse demonstrates how God uses allegory to describe the

²⁴ Ghulam Hussein Adeel, *Ibn Arabi’s Doctrine of the Perfect Man* (Rawalpindi: Islamic Thought Center, 2014), 61.

²⁵ William Chittick, “The School of Ibn Arabi,” in *Routledge History of World Philosophies*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (New York: Routledge, 2007), 515.

indescribable so that “the intricate secrets and mysteries [of the object] may become better known.”²⁶

Al-Tabari states that the niche is the heart of a believer, and the lamp and the glass represent faith and the Qur'an. Although he does not provide any specific meanings for the oil, he states that it generally refers to a believer's steadfast conviction and pious conduct.²⁷ Similarly, al-Tabatabai also suggests that the niche is the chest cavity of the believer, and the lamp is the light of guidance. The glass is her (the believer's) heart, and the oil is the knowledge that is neither eastern nor western but rather from the blessed tree of prophets who brought divine wisdom. When the believer acts with conviction on the divine command, her character shines bright like a star, and her conduct produces layers upon layers (*nūrun 'ala nur*) of good deeds, acts of worship, and righteousness.²⁸

Al-Tabatabai then delves deeper into the allegorical interpretations of this Qur'anic metaphor, like the one from Imam al-Sadiq stating that the niche is Fatima, the lamp is Hasan, the glass is Hussain, and the oil represents Abraham, the great ancestor of Prophet Muhammad (S).²⁹ This interpretation highlights the historical role of the Prophet and his family in propagating and sustaining divine guidance. It was in the house of Fatima where the Prophet found spiritual and physical comfort and a repository for his tradition. Through Fatima's sons Hasan and Hussain, the bloodline and the legacy of the Prophet's teachings endured. Together, they sustained the works and wisdom of the divine prophets in the progeny of Abraham, who was neither Christian nor Jewish.³⁰ Fatima and

²⁶ Mujtaba Musavi Lari, *Hidden Truths in God's Word*, accessed March 9, 2020, www.al-islam.org/hidden-truths-gods-word-sayyid-mujtaba-musawi-lari/exposition-verse-light-ayat-al-nur.

²⁷ Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, Vol. 17:302–305.

²⁸ Al-Tabatabai, *al-Mizan*, Vol. 15:140.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁰ “Ibrahim was not a Jew nor a Christian, but he was an upright Muslim, and he was not of the polytheists.” (Q 3:67)

her family assisted the Prophet at every stage of his mission. After him, the Imams in her lineage proved to be guardians of his values, sometimes sacrificing their lives like Hussain in Karbala and establishing schools of jurisprudence like Imam al-Sadiq. Hence, according to al-Tabatabai, the layers of light upon light (*nūrun 'ala nur*) refer to the twelve Holy Imams in Fatima's progeny.

Ali ibn Ibrahim Qummi and Makarim Shirazi offer similar allegorical interpretations of the "verse of light." Qummi quotes a fifth-century Muslim exegete that Imam al-Sadiq would interpret the niche in the "verse of light" as Fatima.³¹ Similarly, Shirazi builds on hadith that interpret the lamp as the Prophet's heart upon which the light of the Qur'an descended.³² The glass surrounding the lamp refers to Ali, who supported and protected the Prophet in his mission during the early days of propagation in Mecca and when Muslims were politically established in Medina. Light upon light refers to the Imams in Fatima's progeny. Together, they represent the Qur'anic metaphor of "the blessed tree."³³ This interpretation highlights the virtues of Fatima and brings to the fore the foundational role that women play in establishing divine thought and propagating divine guidance.

³¹ Ali bin Ibrahim Qummi, *Tafsir al-Qummi* (Qom: Manshurat Maktabat al-Huda, 1982), Vol. 2:103.

³² "O Prophet! Indeed, We have sent you as a witness, as a bearer of good news and as a warner and as a summoner to Allah by His permission, and as a radiant lamp." (Q 33:45, 46) Also, Shirazi, *Tafsir Namuneh*, Vol. 14:392.

³³ "Have you not regarded how Allah has drawn a parable? A good word is like a good tree: its roots are steady, and its branches are in the sky. It gives its fruit every season by the leave of its Lord. Allah draws these parables for mankind so that they may take admonition." (Q 14:26, 27) In his commentary, Shirazi explains that the metaphor of the blessed tree is a reference to the Prophet, Fatima, Ali, Hasan, Hussain, and the other Imams in their lineage. The steady root is a reference to the Prophet, the branches are Fatima, Ali, and the Imams in their progeny, and the fruit in every season is a reference to the knowledge disseminated by the Imams as heirs of the prophetic teachings. Shirazi, *Tafsir Namuneh*, Vol. 10:273, 274.

The "Verse of Purity"

The concept of purity is a recurring theme in the Qur'an as it relates to the faith, thoughts, deeds, and actions of Muslims. It is also a primary component of jurisprudential aspects of the diet, clothing, relationships, and acts of worship. For example, while preparing for their daily ritual prayer, Muslims are especially attentive to physical cleanliness and sincerity of intentions. Purity in the sense of faultlessness or immaculateness emerges from Q 33:33, commonly referred to as the 'verse of purity' (*aya al-tathīr*), which states, "Indeed, Allah desires to repel all impurity from you, O *Ahl al-Bayt* [People of the Household] and purify you with a thorough purification." A discourse on the *asbāb al-nuzūl* of this verse informs Fatima's axial position among the divinely purified *Ahl al-Bayt*.

In the Shi'i tradition, the *Ahl al-Bayt* plays a significant role as a primary source in understanding and validating hadith. Having been divinely guarded against every imaginable impurity, this elite group would best serve as a beacon of the purest form of faith, conduct, and righteousness. While exegetes differ in how they identify the "*Ahl al-Bayt*" (people of the household) in this verse, Shi'i exegetes concur that this group comprises Fatima, her father, her husband, and her children, including the eleven Imams in her lineage.

Although al-Tabari endorses the popular Shi'i interpretation, he also suggests that Prophet's wives are included among the *Ahl al-Bayt*. Alluding to this debate among exegetes, al-Tabari quotes that when Abi Ammar came across a group of companions who were reviling and cursing Ali, he interjected, saying, "Shall I inform you of the one you are cursing? I sat with the Prophet when Fatima, Ali, Hasan, and Hussain entered. The Prophet welcomed them, cast his cloak over them, and said, 'O Allah! These are my *Ahl al-Bayt*. Repel from them every impurity and purify them in a thorough purification.'"³⁴

³⁴ Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, Vol. 19:104.

Al-Tabari narrates another tradition from Umm Salama, the Prophet's wife, that when the "verse of purity" was revealed, the Prophet called for Fatima, Ali, Hasan, and Hussain cast his cloak over them and said, "O Allah! These are my *Ahl al-Bayt*. Repel from them every impurity and purify them in a thorough purification."³⁵ Enumerating similar traditions, al-Tabari presents substantial evidence that "the household" in this verse refers to the Prophet, Fatima, Ali, Hasan, and Hussain.

He also includes traditions that state that for many months (some traditions say six months, others say seven months) following the revelation of this verse, the Prophet would come to Fatima's door at every prayer time saying, "The prayer, the prayer, 'Indeed, Allah desires to repel all impurity from you, O People of the Household, and purify you with a thorough purification.'"³⁶ Along with traditions that identify the *Ahl al-Bayt* as the five individuals mentioned earlier, al-Tabari also includes two traditions that state that this verse was revealed specifically for the wives of the Prophet.³⁷

Al-Tabatabai endorses the narration of Umm Salama as quoted by al-Tabari.³⁸ However, he refutes the view that the *Ahl al-Bayt* in this verse includes the Prophet's wives drawing on the grammatical use of "*ankum*" (from you) in "Allah desires to repel all impurity from you [*ankum*], O People of the Household...." *Kum* (you) is used to address a group of males only or majority males. In contrast, *kunna* refers to a group comprising solely of females. The beginning of Q 33:33 and the preceding verses use *kunna* because they specifically address the Prophet's wives (a group of females).³⁹ However, in the middle of Q 33:33, the form changes to *kum*, suggesting that the addressee group has changed from comprising females only to females and males. So grammatically, al-Tabatabai

³⁵ Ibid., 105.

³⁶ Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, Vol. 19:103.

³⁷ Ibid., 108.

³⁸ Al-Tabatabai, *al-Mizan*, Vol. 16:323–326.

³⁹ Ibid., 316.

argues the *Ahl al-Bayt* in this verse cannot be a group of females only; hence, the interpretation that the “verse of purity” was meant for the Prophet’s wives is erroneous.

Shirazi also supports the view that the *Ahl al-Bayt*, recipients of divine “thorough purification,” refers to the five individuals mentioned by al-Tabari and al-Tabatabai. He affirms their rendition of Umm Salama’s narration and that the Prophet recited the “verse of purity” at Fatima’s door at every prayer time for several months. He then adds a detailed narration that one day the Prophet visited Fatima complaining of fatigue. She covered him in a Yemeni cloak. Soon after, the Prophet gathered her, Ali, Hasan, and Hussain under his cloak and prayed for them. Subsequently, Gabriel descended with the “verse of purity.”⁴⁰ This event, also known as hadith al-Kisa (the Event of the Cloak), holds an exalted position in the Shi’i tradition and is recited at the beginning of most Shi’i gatherings to seek blessings for the attendees.

In his article “Hadith al-Kisa: The Narration of the Cloak,” Gholam Hussein Masoud states that when the Prophet had gathered Fatima, Ali, Hasan, and Hussain with him under the cloak, a light emanated from them that reached the skies. Gabriel witnessed this and asked God about the ones under the cloak. God replied, “They are Fatima, her father, her husband, and her sons.”⁴¹ This style of introduction pivots Fatima as an axis for the group and privileges relationship to her as a reference for all other members. It awards centrality to a woman who was unusual in the patriarchal norms of the seventh-century Arabian society. The inclusion of Fatima in the *asbāb al-nuzūl* of the “verse of purity” makes her an inspirational model to argue for equal access to spiritual purity by women, men, and children.

⁴⁰ Shirazi, *Tafsir Namuneh*, Vol. 17:253, 254.

⁴¹ Gholam Hussein Masoud, “Hadith al-Kisa: The Narration of the Cloak,” *Message of the Thaqaalayn* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 118, <https://messageofthaqaalayn.com/archive/volume-13/number-1/hadith-al-kisa-the-narration-of-the-cloak/>.

The “Verse of Mubāhala”

After the Muslims victoriously returned to Mecca in the eighth year after hijra, neighboring tribes and nations became increasingly interested in Islam. They visited the Prophet to learn more about his message and his role as leader of the newly founded state. The Qur’an speaks of a Christian delegation from the central Arabian region of Najran who visited the Prophet and the Muslim–Christian dialogue that followed (Q 3:59–79). The theological status of Jesus was the focus of their conversation. The Muslims insisted that he was a revered prophet of God who was miraculously born to the Virgin Mary and given a heavenly scripture, while the Christians insisted that he was the son of God. After deliberating on the topic for several days, the dialogue had changed into a deadlocked debate and consequently concluded in a peculiar contest known as *mubāhala* (imprecation). The “verse of *mubāhala*” states, “Should anyone argue with you [Prophet] concerning him [Jesus], after the knowledge that has come to you, say, ‘Come! Let us call our sons and your sons, our women, and your women, ourselves and yourselves, then let us pray earnestly and call down Allah’s curse upon the liars’” (Q 3:61). A historical and exegetical analysis of this verse affirms Fatima’s participation in this contest and the Prophet’s confidence in her truthfulness.

Mubāhala is from *bahala*, meaning “to set free;” when an animal is let loose, it is called *bāhil*. In the context of supplication, *ibtahala* means to pray earnestly and free from every worldly attachment. *Mubāhala* is a supplication to detach the untrue party from the protection and mercy of God.⁴² In the verse mentioned earlier, it refers to breaking the tie of contradicting views about Jesus through a contest that would invoke God’s wrath on the false claimants. With the Christians adamant in their assertion of Jesus being the son of God and the Prophet’s insistence that Jesus was a pious servant and messenger of God, the *mubāhala* served as a divinely decreed tiebreaker.

⁴² Shirazi, *Tafsir Namuneh*, Vol. 2:348.

Al-Tabari and al-Tabatabai concur on the *asbāb al-nuzūl* of this verse. Al-Tabari states that on the eve of the *mubāhala*, the Christian delegation spent the night deliberating their responses to the following day's proceedings. If Muhammad (S) were a true prophet of God, then God would not descend His wrath upon him, and if he were an angel asking them to confront the truth, they would not stand a chance of survival. So, they decided to play it safe and avoid engaging in the *mubāhala* if the Prophet chose to proceed. On the assigned day, they saw the Prophet arrive with Hussain in his arms and Fatima walking behind him. He asked to begin the *mubāhala*, and they declined, agreeing to live in peace with the Muslims and pay annual taxes to the Muslim government.⁴³ Al-Tabari also quotes that on the day of *mubāhala*, the Prophet took Hasan and Ali along with Fatima and Hussain.⁴⁴

Al-Tabatabai narrates from Imam al-Sadiq that the Prophet received the Christian delegation in the mosque in Medina. He started the conversation by acknowledging that there is no God but God, that he was the Messenger of God, and that Jesus was God's servant and a pious human being. The Christians asked, "Who was his father?" The Prophet replied with the verses, "Indeed the case of Jesus with Allah is like the case of Adam: He created him from dust, then said to him, 'Be,' and he was. This is the truth from your Lord, so do not be among the skeptics" (Q 3:59, 60). Then he asked, "What do you say about Adam? Was he not a servant of God and a pious human being?" When they responded in the affirmative, the Prophet asked, "Then who was his [Adam's] father?" The Christian delegation remained silent.

After several days of dialogue and debate, the Prophet shared that Gabriel had descended with the "verse of *mubāhala*." With both parties being as convinced of their positions as was the case, a *mubāhala* could be the only course for a settlement. As they retired for the night, the Christians deliberated, "If he brings common

⁴³ Ibid., Vol. 5:469.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 471.

members of his community, then we will engage in *mubāhala*, but if he brings his closest and dearest family members, then we will refuse. Only a truthful prophet would confidently bring his loved ones to such a grave contest.”⁴⁵ The next day the Prophet appeared with one woman, one man, and two boys. The Christians realized that the man was Ali, his cousin, the woman was Fatima, his daughter, and the children were Hasan and Hussain, his grandsons. After consultations amongst themselves, they retracted from the contest and agreed to pay taxes in return for the freedom to practice their religion. The Prophet agreed.⁴⁶

The event of *mubāhala* also appears in the works of the twelfth-century literary scholar and jurist Sayyid Ali bin Musa bin Tawus al-Hilli. Al-Hilli narrates that on the appointed day, the Prophet emerged carrying Hussain in his arms, holding Hasan by the hand, with Fatima walking behind him and Ali walking behind her. The Prophet said to them, “when I raise my hands for supplication, say ‘Amen’.”⁴⁷ When the leader of the Christian delegation saw the Prophet and his family approaching, he said, “Indeed, I see such faces that if they were to ask God to move mountains, God would grant their wish. We will not engage in *mubāhala*.”⁴⁸ Their observation alludes to the charismatic and spiritual virtues of the *Ahl al-Bayt*.

Al-Tabatabai explains that participating in the *mubāhala* meant subjecting one’s conviction and existence to a divine test. The Prophet’s careful selection of those who would accompany him in such a test demonstrates his confidence and trust in their sincerity. Fatima’s inclusion in this select group is a testimony to her truthfulness.⁴⁹ Analyzing the verse grammatically, al-Tabatabai

⁴⁵ Al-Tabatabai, *al-Mizan*, Vol. 3:264.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Sayyid Ali bin Musa bin Tawus al-Hilli, *Iqbal al-A’maal* (Beirut: Mu’assasat ‘Alami li-l-Matbuat, 1996), 841.

⁴⁸ Tawus al-Hilli, *Iqbal al-A’maal*, 841.

⁴⁹ Al-Tabatabai, *al-Mizan*, Vol. 3:257.

states that all three nouns: sons, women, and selves, are plural, representing groups of three or more individuals. Despite the allowance to include more, the Prophet chose one woman, two sons, and one other man suggesting that those selected were unmatched and exemplary among the Muslims.⁵⁰ Fatima's inclusion in this group renders her a female model of truthfulness. It is also noteworthy that in response to the divine instruction of bringing "our sons" to the *mubāhala*, the Prophet brought Fatima's children. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Prophet's progeny continued through his daughter's children in a culture where male children represented continuity of lineage. Invoking the "verse of *mubāhala*," each Imam in Fatima's bloodline justified their title of "*ibn Rasulullah*" (son of God's Messenger).

The verses of *kauthar* (abundance), *abrār* (pious), *nur* (light), *tathir* (purity), and *mubāhala* (contest of truth) not only provide hues of Fatima's historical narrative but also demonstrate the Qur'anic perspective on feminine worth, piety, and participation in establishing a moral and just society. While Muslims generally respect Fatima's position, Shi'i spiritual literature posits that her human form comprises a more-than-human element that connects to a mystical realm.

Fatima in the Mystical Traditions

Shi'i historians have often described Fatima as "the 'Mother' of Shi'i Islam."⁵¹ Her exceptional virtues and spiritual eminence make her "a major theological lynchpin in Shi'i thought."⁵² In addition

⁵⁰ Ibid. Vol. 4:261.

⁵¹ John Renard, *Islamic Theological Themes: A Primary Source Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 296, accessed November 30, 2018, <http://o-search.ebscohost.com.grace.gtu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=781018&site=ehost-live>.

⁵² Ibid., 309.

to her prominent theological position as a revered member of the distinguished *Ahl al-Bayt*, specific mystical dimensions of her life have left an indelible mark on Shi'i literature. This section examines five mystical facets of her narrative: her creation from light and her worship of God in the celestial realm prior to the inception of the world and Adam's creation; her mystical conception by her mother Khadija, her communication with her mother while still in the womb, and the presence of sacred female figures at her birth; her mystical appellations; the *tasbīh* (glorification)⁵³ imparted to her by the Prophet; her intercessory authority both in the earthly realm and the hereafter.

Creation from Light

The primordial existence of the Prophet's light (*nur Muhammadi*) is not an alien notion in the Sunni tradition. Shi'i literature, however, elaborates on the mystical existence of the *Ahl al-Bayt* in much detail. In his commentary on the *Nahj al-Balagha*, Habibullah al-Khoei explores some of the arcane aspects of Fatima's mystical creation from the Prophet's preexistent light (*nur Muhammadi*). Quoting al-Majlisi's *Bihar*, al-Khoei states:

The Prophet said, "Indeed, God created me, Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Hussain before He created Adam. There was no firm sky, no revolving earth, no darkness, no light, no sun, no moon, no Paradise, no Hell." Abbas [the Prophet's uncle] asked the Prophet to explain further. He continued, "O uncle! When God desired to create us, he worded a word (*kalima*) and created light (*nur*). Then He worded another word and created spirit (*ruh*). He mixed the light and the spirit and created me, Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Hussain. We glorified Him while there was no glorification, and

⁵³ *Tasbīh* is derived from the root of *sabbaha* and means to glorify God. *Tasbīh* is also referred to the rosary beads which are used to keep count of such glorifications.

we venerated Him even before the concept of veneration existed. And when God desired to create [the rest of] His creation, He took from my light and created the Throne (*'arsh*). Hence, the Throne is from my light, my light is from God's Light, and my light is more virtuous than the light of the Throne. Then, He took from my brother Ali's light and created the angels. Hence, the angels are from Ali's light, Ali's light is from God's Light, and Ali is more virtuous than the angels. Then He took from my daughter Fatima's light and created the heavens and the earth. Hence, the heavens and the earth are from the light of my daughter Fatima, my daughter Fatima's light is from God's Light, and my daughter Fatima is more virtuous than the heavens and the earth. Then He took from my son Hasan's light and created the sun and the moon. Hence, the sun and the moon are from the light of my son Hasan, my son Hasan's light is from God's Light, and Hasan is more virtuous than the sun and the moon. Then He took from my son Hussain's light and created Paradise and the *ḥūr* [maidens of Paradise]. Hence, Paradise and the *ḥūr* are from the light of my son Hussain, my son Hussain's light is from God's Light, and Hussain is more virtuous than Paradise and the *ḥūr*."⁵⁴

This tradition describes Fatima's mystical creation from divine light, her preexistence with the *nur Muhammadi* in a state of glorifying God, and the creation of the heavens and the earth from her light. For the Shi'a, this tradition is inherently connected to the "verse of light" discussed earlier in this chapter. Some mystical traditions also narrate that Fatima's primordial existence with the *Ahl al-Bayt* became the source of all the blessings that descended upon the earth and its dwellers. In his *Mikyal al-Makarim*, Muhammad Taqi al-Isfahani lists several hadith that speak to this idea. Quoting Imam al-Sadiq, al-Isfahani states that the Prophet said:

⁵⁴ Mirza Habibullah al-Khoei, *Minhaj al-Bara'a fi Sharh Nahj al-Balagha* (Beirut: Dar Ahya al-Turath al-Arabiyya, 2003), 325. Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar* (Beirut: Mu'assassat al-Wafa, 1983), Vol. 15:10, 11.

The Almighty created us in a good creation. He shaped us in a goodly shape. He made us His eyes among His servants (so that we can witness their deeds and conduct), and He made us His speaking tongue. He made us His hand of mercy and benevolence spread over the head of His servants, and He made us His face (so that through us His attributes may be identified). He made us a gate (a medium to access His knowledge, faith, and obedience) and a treasure (of His knowledge, recognition, and mercy) in His heavens and earth. The trees bear fruit, the fruits ripen, the streams flow, the rain descends, and plants grow from the earth by our blessing (*baraka*). Through the model of our worship, God is worshipped.⁵⁵

Al-Majlisi has compiled many similar traditions describing Fatima's preexistence in vivid detail.⁵⁶

Journey from the Heavens to the Earth

Fatima's birth date is "a source of polemics between the Shi'i and the Sunni and a controversial point upon which to begin a study of her life."⁵⁷ Clohessy states that according to Sunni historians, she was born five years before the proclamation of Islam (605 CE). In contrast, Shi'i historians insist that she was born five years after the first revelation (615 CE).⁵⁸ Shi'i literature includes mystical narratives concerning her conception, speaking from the womb, and the descending of heavenly women to assist with her parturition.

According to Shi'i reports, Fatima was conceived from a heavenly fruit Gabriel brought for the Prophet. The tenth-century hadith scholar Shaykh al-Sadouq narrates,

⁵⁵ Muhammad Taqi al-Isfahani, *Mikyal al-Makarim fi Fawa'id al-Dua li-l-Qai'm* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-'Alami li-l-Matbuat, 2001), Vol. 1:39.

⁵⁶ Al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 16:361–362.

⁵⁷ Christopher Paul Clohessy, *Fatima, Daughter of Muhammad* (New Jersey: Georgia Press, 2018), 21.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

The Prophet said, "God, High and Mighty, created Fatima's light from His light before shaping the heavens and the earth and before creating Adam and the spirits....He placed her in an apple in Paradise, and Gabriel came to me bearing it and said, "Peace, mercy, and blessings of God be upon you, O Muhammad." I replied, "And peace, mercy, and blessings of God be upon you, my beloved Gabriel." He said, "Muhammad, your Lord greets you with peace." I said, "Peace comes from Him and returns to Him." Then Gabriel presented an apple from Paradise and said it was God's gift. I took it and pressed it to my chest. Gabriel said, "God, Almighty says, "Eat it."" I split it open and saw a brilliant light that startled me. He said, "Eat it entirely, for this is the light of *al-Mansura* in the heaven who will be known as Fatima on earth.""⁵⁹

After eating the mystical fruit from heaven, the Prophet headed home to Khadija, and Fatima was conceived. In his biographical work on Fatima, Muhammad Taqi Muqaddam quotes a tradition by al-Sadouq that adds a prelude to this narrative. Muqaddam states that God asked the Prophet to worship in solitude for forty days. He decided to spend those days in the house of Fatima bint Asad and sent Ammar Yasir to inform Khadija that his absence from home was in obedience to a divine commandment.⁶⁰ He spent forty consecutive days fasting and the nights in prayer. On the last night, Gabriel descended with fruit from heaven. The Prophet ate the fruit and prepared for his prayer. Gabriel then said he should return home to Khadija, for God desired to grant him pure progeny.⁶¹ Fatima's light moved from the heavenly fruit to Khadija's womb that night.

⁵⁹ Shaykh al-Sadouq Muhammad bin Ali Ibn Babawayh, *Ma'ani al-Akhar* (Qom: Mu'assasat al-Nashr al-Islami al-Tabi'a li Jamat al-Mudarisin bi Qum al-Musharrafa, 1958), 396.

⁶⁰ Fatima bint Asad was the wife of Abu Talib (the Prophet's uncle) and the mother of Ali.

⁶¹ Muhammad Taqi Muqaddam, *Fadha'il al-Zahra wa Manaqib Insiyya al-Hawra* (Lucknow: al-Jawad Foundation, 2008), 89, 90.

While Khadija rejoiced at her pregnancy, she also felt socially estranged. Most Meccan women thought it was unbecoming for a woman of Khadija's stature to marry the orphan Prophet, so they socially ostracized her. Khadija was content with her love for the Prophet and stayed committed to him. When she felt lonely during her pregnancy, the child in her womb would speak to her. Al-Majlisi quotes,

Mufazzal bin Umar states that he asked Imam al-Sadiq about Fatima's birth. He replied, "When God's Prophet married Khadija (may God be pleased with her), the women of Mecca dissociated, neither greeted nor visited her, and forbade other women from speaking to her. Khadija felt estranged on account of this. Fatima began speaking from her mother's womb to console her. One day the Prophet heard Khadija conversing with her unborn child and asked, "Khadija, who speaks with you?" She replied, "The child in my womb speaks to me and keeps me company." The Prophet said, "Gabriel has informed me that the child is a female, she is pure and auspicious, and God Almighty will bring forth from her progeny Imams whom He will make leaders on His earth after the termination of His revelation."⁶²

Al-Majlisi also states that heavenly midwives assisted Khadija as Fatima's birth drew near.

When the time for Khadija's delivery came, she sent word to the women of Quraish and the women of Bani Hashim, asking them to assist her in a way in which women take charge of each other in times of childbirth. They declined her call, saying that Khadija had defied them, that she had not paid heed to their words by marrying Muhammad, the penniless orphan of Abu Talib, and that they would not aide her. Khadija was distressed by their rejection. At that moment, four tall women came to her. Their height was like

⁶² Al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 16:80.

that of the women of Bani Hashim. Khadija was startled by them. One of them said, “Khadija, do not be sad. We are messengers sent by your Lord; we are your sisters. I am Sara; this is Asiya, daughter of Muzahim [wife of Pharaoh], and she is your companion in Paradise; this is Maryam, daughter of Imran [mother of Jesus], and this is Saphora, daughter of Shuaib. God Almighty sent us to assist you in a way in which women help each other in times of childbirth.”⁶³

In another version of this hadith, al-Majlisi names the four heavenly women as Sara, Asiya, Maryam, and Kulthum, the sister of Moses.⁶⁴ In his *Dhakha'ir al-'Uqba*, the thirteenth-century historian Muhib al-Din Ahmad al-Tabari narrates a similar except that it names the four women as Hawwa [Eve], Asiya, Kulthum, and Maryam.⁶⁵ Some narrations also mention that Fatima testified to the tenets of faith as soon as she was born. Al-Majlisi's version continues to provide more details as follows:

One sat on Khadija's right, the other to her left, the third in front, and the fourth behind her. Khadija gave birth to Fatima, the pure and immaculate. Light radiated from the child's face and entered the houses of Mecca. There was no place in the east and the west, but her light shone at it. The woman in front of her received the child and washed her with the water of *Kauthar*.⁶⁶ She then brought two pieces of cloth whiter than milk and more fragrant than musk and ambergris. She wrapped the newborn Fatima with one piece and veiled her with the other. Then she started to speak to her [like adults speak to infants]. Fatima responded with the *shahada*, “There

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., Vol. 43:3.

⁶⁵ Muhib al-Din Ahmad al-Tabari, *Dhakha'ir al-'Uqba fi Manaqib Zawi al-Qurba* (Jeddah: Maktabat al-Sahaba, 1996), 90.

⁶⁶ Although in the discussion on “Fatima in the Qur'an,” the allegorical interpretation of *Kauthar* is taken as a reference to Fatima, *Kauthar* in this context is the pool in heaven which has been created for its dwellers.

is no god but God, my father is the Messenger of God (God's blessings be with him and his progeny) and the master of the prophets, Ali is the master of those entrusted [with the message of the prophets], and my son is the master of the tribes." She then greeted the women and addressed each one by her name, and they smiled at her. The maidens of heaven rejoiced, and the people of Paradise spread the good news of Fatima's birth to one another.⁶⁷

Narrations of Fatima's creation from a heavenly fruit, her speaking in the womb and at birth, and the descending of midwives from Paradise are consistent features of Shi'i biographical works on her life.

Fatima's Appellations

Besides the supernatural circumstances surrounding her birth, there is significant literature on Fatima's mystical. Muqaddam lists sixteen names and a hundred and thirty-five titles for Fatima. Imam al-Sadiq ascribes nine names to Fatima that highlight her virtuous character; they are *Siddīqa* (the righteous), *Mubāraka* (the blessed), *Tāhira* (the pure), *Zakiya* (the unblemished); *Radīya* (the one who is pleased with God), *Marḍīya* (the one whom God is pleased with), *Muḥaddatha* (the one who is spoken to by angels), *Zahra* (the luminous), and *Batūl* (the pure virgin). Here, we look at mystical connotations of her names Fatima, *Zahra*, and *Muḥaddatha*.

Fatima is from *faṭama*, which means "to wean." It appears with two different prepositions placed after it: *faṭama bi* and *faṭama 'an*, meaning "weaned for" [the sake of] or "wean with" and "weaned [away] from," respectively. Hadith literature illustrates that God weaned Fatima with knowledge and weaned her away from ignorance.⁶⁸ Imam al-Reza⁶⁹ states that the Prophet said, "I named my

⁶⁷ Al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 16:80, 81.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 43:13.

⁶⁹ Eighth Imam of the Twelver Shi'a, Ali bin Musa al-Reza.

daughter Fatima because God Almighty weaned her and those who love her from the fire.”⁷⁰ In another version of this hadith, al-Majlisi states that Imam al-Sadiq said, “Do you know what the interpretation of Fatima is? It is that she is weaned away from every evil.”⁷¹

Her appellation “*Zahra*” appears in Shi‘i literature as a separate and sometimes second name following Fatima. *Zahra* is from *zahara*, meaning radiant or luminous, and refers to Fatima’s pre-existent light. It emerges from a mystical reading of the “verse of light,” as discussed earlier in this chapter. Imam al-Sadiq narrated that,

When God Almighty created her from the light of His majesty, she radiated and illuminated the heavens and the earth with her light. The angels were overwhelmed by this vision. They fell before God in prostration, saying, “Our Lord and our Master, what is this light?” God revealed, “This is a light from my light that I created from My Majesty and lodged in the heavens. I brought it forth from the loins of My Prophet who I have preferred over all the prophets. I have brought forth from that light Imams to accomplish My command and guide to My truth. I have made them My caliphs in My earth after the termination of My revelation.”⁷²

In another tradition, al-Majlisi provides vivid details about the spectrum of light that emanated from Fatima, resulting in her being called *Zahra*. Transmitting from al-Sadouq’s *‘Ilal al-Sharā’i*, al-Majlisi states that Imam al-Sadiq explained the meaning of *Zahra* as follows:

The prince of believers [Ali] witnessed her radiance thrice a day. During morning prayer, her face shone, and the whiteness of that light penetrated the houses in Medina, illuminating their walls and beds. Astonished by what they had seen, they came to the Prophet

⁷⁰ Al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 43:12.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷² *Ibid.*, Vol. 43:12.

seeking an explanation. He sent them to Fatima's house of Fatima where they saw her sitting in her prayer niche, praying. Light emanated from her face and spread out from her prayer niche. They understood that what they had seen was the light of Fatima. When the day reached its peak, and she stood up for the prayer, her face shone with yellow light, and the yellowness entered the people's rooms and yellowed their walls and complexions. They came to the Prophet to ask about what they had seen, and he sent them to the house of Fatima. They noticed her standing in the prayer niche while the light from her face, may the blessings of God be upon her, her father, her husband, and her children were emanating a yellow color. They understood that what they had seen was from the light of her face. At the end of the day, when the sun had set, the glow on Fatima's face took a reddish color, and her face radiated with redness, joyfully and thankfully to God Almighty. The redness of her face entered the people's rooms and reddened their walls. When this vision astonished them, they came to the Prophet to ask him about what they had seen, and he sent them to the house of Fatima. They found her sitting, praising, and glorifying God, and they understood that what they had seen was from the light of Fatima's face. This light did not cease to emanate from her face until Hussain was born.⁷³

Although the names Fatima and *Zahra* are the most famous names that appear in Islamic literature, *Muḥaddatha* is another name that highlights her extraordinary spirituality. *Muḥaddatha* is the feminine form for the noun *muḥaddath*, which refers to someone who communicates with angels. In his *Manaqib Aal Abi Talib*, the twelfth-century Shi'i theologian and jurist Mohammad bin Shahr Ashub explores the different readings of the verse, "We did not send any apostle before you [Muhammad], but We revealed to him that 'There is no god except Me; so worship Me'" (Q 21:25). Ibn Abbas and Muhammad bin Abi Bakr would read this verse as,

⁷³ Al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 43:11.

“We did not send any apostle before you nor any messenger nor any *muḥaddath*.” Ibn Shar Ashub states that revelation is not exclusively for prophets. The Qur’an records conversations of individuals with angels who were not necessarily prophets. Imam al-Sadiq explained, “Maryam was not a prophet; she was a *muḥaddatha*. The mother of Moses was not a prophet; she was a *muḥaddatha*. Sara met the angels when they gave her glad tidings of the birth of Isaac and Jacob after him, and she was not a prophet. Fatima was a *muḥaddatha*, and she was not a prophet.”⁷⁴ This narration includes Fatima among the women who conversed with angels.

According to Ibn Shahr Ashub, Fatima spoke to Gabriel, Azrael, and other angels. Imam al-Baqir states,

The Messenger of God sent Salman to Fatima’s house. He stood at the door, watching Fatima recite the Qur’an while the hand mill was turning by itself and grinding wheat, and there was no one else in sight. Salman returned to the Prophet and reported what he had seen. The Prophet smiled and said, “O Salman! God has filled my daughter Fatima’s heart and body with faith in such a way that when she desires a repose through the worship of God, He sends an angel by the name of Zuqabil (in other narrations, it is Gabriel) to turn the hand mill for her. God suffices her with provisions for this world and the hereafter.”⁷⁵

Similar narrations state that Gabriel and Mikael would come to rock her son’s cradle to keep the child calm while Fatima attended to her duties.⁷⁶ While narrating the accounts of the Prophet’s demise, Ibn Shahr Ashub quotes from Ibn Abbas:

During the final moments of the Prophet’s life, as Fatima sat by his side, there was a knock at the door. Fatima asked, “Who’s there?”

⁷⁴ Muhammad bin Shahr Ashub al-Mazandarani, *Manaqib Aal Abi Talib* (Najaf: al-Mutabi’at al-Haidariyya, 1956), Vol. 3:115.

⁷⁵ Ibn Shahr Ashub, *Manaqib Aal Abi Talib*, Vol. 3:117.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

A voice replied, "I am a stranger. I have come to ask from God's Messenger. Do you permit me to enter?" She replied, "Come back later, may God have mercy on you; the God's Messenger is not well." He returned after some time and knocked at the door and said, "A stranger comes asking for God's Messenger if you would grant permission to strangers." The Prophet opened his eyes and said, "Fatima, do you know who is at the door? He is the one who disperses crowds and cuts off pleasures. He is the angel of death. He has never asked for permission before this, nor will he ever ask for permission after this. Permit him to enter."⁷⁷

Imam al-Sadiq said that Fatima lived for seventy-five days after her father's death, grieving for him all the time she was alive. Gabriel would visit her often, consoling her with the glad tidings of her father's lofty position in the next world, and telling her of the events after her death. She narrated these forecasted events to Ali, and he wrote them down.⁷⁸ In his *al-Kafi*, Kulayni states that Ali compiled the conversations of Fatima with Gabriel, which later became known as *Mushaf* of Fatima (Fatima's Scroll).⁷⁹ The scroll passed to the Imams in Fatima's lineage, and they drew upon its contents to develop their knowledge. Imam al-Sadiq said:

The *zanādiqa* will appear in 128 AH (745/746 CE) because I found it in the *Mushaf* of Fatima. The narrator asked about this *Mushaf*. He replied, "When God Almighty took the Prophet from this world, it caused extreme grief to Fatima, the extent of which can be known by none but God. God sent her an angel to give solace to her and speak to her. She informed Ali about this. So, when the angel would visit, Ali would write down all that he would hear of the conversations

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibn Shahr Ashub, *Manaqib Aal Abi Talib*, Vol. 3:116.

⁷⁹ Muhammad bin Yaquub al-Kulayni, *Al-Kafi* (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, 1986), Vol. 1:241.

between Fatima and the angel, so much so that his notes took the shape of a whole book. Knowledge of all that was and all that will be is within it.”⁸⁰

In another version of a similar narration, Imam al-Sadiq said, “I was looking at the scroll of Fatima. No king would rule on earth without being listed therein by his name and father’s name.”⁸¹ These narrations highlight Fatima’s mystical and spiritual aspects, how they informed the development of Shi’i thought and theology, and the legacy of knowledge she left behind for the Imams.

Other accolades characterize her as “immaculate” and among the excellent women of the world as described by the Prophet. Shi’i exegetes build on the “verse of purity” (Q 33:33) to posit that the *Ahl al-Bayt* are “immaculate.” As discussed earlier in this chapter, Shi’i commentators identify the *Ahl al-Bayt* as Fatima, her father, her husband, and her children. The concept of “fourteen immaculate ones” (the Prophet, Fatima, and the twelve Imams) is a significant component of Shi’i thought. Fatima’s theological significance emerges from hadith such as “Fatima is part of me; whoever hurts her hurts me and whoever hurts me hurts Allah (exalted be His Majesty!),” and “Allah is displeased when she is angered and pleased when she is pleased.”⁸² Her spiritual distinctions include invocations and chants (*tasbih*) that are popular in daily Shi’i practice.

The Tasbih of Fatima

One of the spiritual legacies of Fatima is the glorification of God taught to her by the Prophet. Referred to as the “*tasbih* of Fatima,” this chant is essential to the lived piety of Muslims, mainly the Shi’a, who chant it after their five daily prayers seeking its spiritual

⁸⁰ Ibid., 240.

⁸¹ Ibid., 242.

⁸² Al-Kulayni, *Al-Kafi*, Vol. 1:311.

benefits. In his biographical work titled *Fatima, the Gracious*, Abu Muhammad Ordoni states that Fatima lived a modest life and did most of the household chores herself. When the workload increased, she went to her father to seek assistance. He said to her,

I will give you something better than a helper, in fact, better than anything in this world. After every prayer, recite *Allahu Akbar* [God is Great] thirty-four times, *Alḥamdolillah* [Praise be to God] thirty-three times, *Subḥanallah* [Glory be to God/God is Immaculate] thirty-three times, and conclude with *La ilaha illa Allah* [there is no god but God]. This is better for you than any helper or anything else in this world.⁸³

This narration exemplifies the spiritual value of the *tasbīh* and recognizes the importance of daily household chores often designated to women in most Muslim cultures. Shi'i exegetes explain that Fatima's *tasbīh* embodies God's remembrance. The Qur'an states, "O you who have faith! Remember Allah with frequent remembrance [*dhikran kathīra*]" (Q 33:41). God-consciousness is aspired to by Muslim mystics and spiritualists. Shi'i exegetes argue that Fatima's *tasbīh* is the key to achieving it. In his *Wasa'il al-Shi'a*, Hurr al-Amuli quotes Imam al-Sadiq saying, "The *tasbīh* of Fatima is one of the interpretations of *dhikran kathīra* as it appears in God's words, 'Remember Allah with frequent remembrance.'"⁸⁴

The interpretation that the *tasbīh* is a distinguished model for the glorification and remembrance of God is also found in the exegesis of the verse, "Remember Me, and I will remember you..." (Q 2:152). Al-Amuli states that according to Imam al-Sadiq, chanting Fatima's *tasbīh* constitutes a way of remembering God, as alluded to in Q 2:152.⁸⁵ Another narration states that Imam al-Baqir

⁸³ Abu Muhammad Ordoni, *Fatima the Gracious* (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 1992), 173.

⁸⁴ Hurr al-Amuli, *Wasa'il al-Shi'a* (Beirut: Dar Ihya at-Turath al-Arabi, 1983), Vol. 6:441.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

said, “There is no model for the supplicatory worship and praise of God better than the *tasbīh* of Fatima because if there were a better model, the Prophet would have surely gifted it to Fatima.”⁸⁶ The Shi‘i hadith corpus contains several narrations that elaborate on the multitude of spiritual benefits associated with Fatima’s *tasbīh*. One such narration from Imam al-Sadiq states, “The recitation of *tasbīh* of Fatima after every obligatory prayer is better than a thousand supererogatory prayers (*al-nafla*) performed every day.”⁸⁷ Another says that “one who recites the *tasbīh* of Fatima seeking forgiveness will succeed because it is a hundred on the tongue and a thousand on the scales [*mīzān*]; it pushes back Satan and earns the pleasure of the Merciful God.”⁸⁸ “Hundred on the tongue” refers to the hundred oral chants that constitute the *tasbīh*, and “a thousand on the scales” is the spiritual value of a thousand good deeds on the scales [*mīzān*]⁸⁹ of the hereafter.

The Twelver Imams valued this *tasbīh* and prescribed it to their children and their followers, indicating its immense spiritual bearing on developing piety. In a conversation with one of his students, Imam al-Sadiq stressed, “We prescribe *tasbīh* of Fatima to our young ones as strongly as we urge them to perform their obligatory prayers. So, [you too] observe this enjoinder for yourselves because there is none amongst God’s servants who observed the *tasbīh* and was saddened by it.”⁹⁰

The *tasbīh* has become a key component of Muslim supplicatory practice of mystical value in Shi‘a lived tradition. Fatima has become an intermediary for millions of Muslims who seek nearness

⁸⁶ Ibid., 443.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 444.

⁸⁸ Al-Amuli, *Wasa’il al-Shi‘a*, Vol. 6:442.

⁸⁹ *Mīzān* is a theme that appears in the Islamic understanding of eschatology and life after death. Muslims believe that *mīzān* is a station on the Day of Judgment where the actions of human beings will be evaluated to make them eligible for entry into Paradise.

⁹⁰ Hurr al-Amuli, *Wasa’il al-Shi‘a*, Vol. 6:442.

to God by chanting her *tasbīh* after their daily *salat*. Shi‘a resort to the *tasbīh* for supplicating for good health and abundance.⁹¹ Fatima plays an intercessory role in the lives of Shi‘i s as they navigate the challenges of living their religious identities and preparing spiritually for their afterlife.

Intercession on the Day of Judgment

Intercession is a heavily debated concept in Islamic theology. Shi‘i theologians, however, argue for it, insisting that specific individuals can be and have been awarded the intercessory authority by God. The debate pivots around the diversity of interpretations of the Qur’anic verses on the theme of intercession. Shi‘i exegetes draw on verses such as “...who is it that may intercede with Him except with His permission?” (Q 2:255) to argue the possibility of intercession with divine approval. The Qur’an mentions the Prophet’s role as interceder when it states, “had they when they wronged themselves, come to you and pleaded to Allah for forgiveness, and the Apostle had pleaded for forgiveness for them, they would have surely found Allah All-Clement, All-Merciful.” (Q 4:64). The intercession of Jacob for his sons appears in verses such as, “they said, ‘father! Plead [with Allah] for the forgiveness of our sins! We have indeed been erring.’ He said, ‘I shall plead with my Lord to forgive you; indeed, He is the All-Forgiving, the All-Merciful’” (Q 12:97, 98).

Besides the intercession of prophets, Qur’anic verses also recommend believers to intercede for each other, which is evident from verses such as, “they who are felicitous ... say, ‘Our Lord, forgive us and our brethren who were our forerunners in the faith...’” (Q 59:10). Although a detailed analysis of the concept of

⁹¹ See www.duas.org/tasbihzehra.htm and https://qfatima.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Salawat-and-Tasbeeh-of-Sayyida-Fatima-Zahrapbuh_WEB.pdf.

intercession in Islamic theology is beyond the scope of this study, Shi'i theologians are clear in their position, affirming the possibility and reality of intercession. Several narrations from the Twelver Shi'i Imams speak to Fatima's intercessory entitlement.

According to al-Majlisi, God gifted Fatima the power to intercede on her wedding day. Clohessy also narrates that when it was time for Fatima to wed, she asked her father for a special dower. She said, "My father, the girls of the rest of [hu]mankind are given dirhams and dinars in marriage. What is the difference between you and the rest of humanity? I will ask God Almighty to make my dower the intercession for the sinners of your community." At that moment, Gabriel descended with a piece of silk inscribed with a message that read: God Almighty has made the dower of Fatima, the radiant daughter of Muhammad, the chosen one, intercession for his sinful community. When she was dying, Fatima asked for the piece of silk to be put in her shroud, saying, "on the Day of Resurrection, I will hold this in my hand and intercede for the sinners of my father's community."⁹²

Al-Majlisi quotes several narrations that describe Fatima's entrance on the Day of Judgment escorted by angels interceding on behalf of those who loved her, her progeny, and her followers. Quoting a narration from the Prophet, al-Majlisi states:

Fatima will arrive on the Day of Judgement riding a heavenly she-camel whose eyes would be rubies, and legs adorned with green emeralds, its muzzle embellished with pearls, and a dome of light hovering above it. Fatima will be wearing a crown of light studded with pearls and sapphire, and the light emanating from it will appear like the light of the glittering stars in heaven. Seventy thousand angels on each side will surround her as she halts before her Lord to intercede for her lovers and the lovers of her progeny.⁹³

⁹² Christopher Paul Clohessy, *Fatima, Daughter of Muhammad* 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Georgia Press, 2018) 198.

⁹³ Al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 8:53, 54.

Another version of a similar narration states that Fatima will be accompanied by Maryam, Asiya, Eve, and Khadija as she makes her way to the plains of Judgment Day.⁹⁴ Another classic narration recited annually in Shi'i religious gatherings during the days of commemorating Fatima's demise (*ayyām faṭimiyya*) is a stirring account of Fatima's intercessory authority. The narration states that Imam al-Sadiq said to his companion Jabir:

When Fatima arrives at the gates of Paradise, she will pause and look back [at the souls gathered on the Day of Judgment]. God will say, "O daughter of My beloved! Why do you turn around when I bid you enter My Paradise?" She will say, "Lord! I desire that my position be known on a day like this." God will say, "Daughter of My beloved! Return and see who has a love for you or your progeny in their heart, take them by the hand and lead them into Paradise." Imam al-Sadiq stressed, "By God, Jabir! On that day, she will pick out her adherents, and those who love her like a bird picks out the good seed from the perishable seed." When they, too, will be gathered at the gate of Paradise, they will turn back towards the crowds, their hearts yearning for God. God will say, "O My beloved ones! Why do you turn around when Fatima, daughter of My beloved, has already interceded on your behalf?" They will say, "Our Lord! We desire that our standing be known on a day like this." God will say, "O My beloved ones! Return and see who has loved you for the love of Fatima, see who has fed you for the love of Fatima, see who has clothed you for the love of Fatima, see who has quenched you for the love of Fatima, see who has defended you from being slandered for the love of Fatima, take them by their hand and lead them into Paradise."⁹⁵

The oral rendition and transmission of these narrations in Shi'i religious congregations foster a shared sense of identity and engender a communal and spiritual kinship among the Shi'a. Fatima,

⁹⁴ Al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 8:53–56.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 43:65.

in their collective consciousness, represents the quintessence of sanctity, piety, veracity, and spirituality. As such, her narrative has become an inseparable component of the Shi'a lived experience and an integral facet of their communal identity, facilitating a sense of belonging despite being a minority.

From Reverence to Reform

The veneration of Fatima by Muslims, particularly the Shi'a, is rooted in her special connection to the Prophet of Islam and her key position in their theology and practice. The Shi'a extract Fatima's narratives from the allegorical and historical interpretations of select verses of the Qur'an, such as the verses of *kauthar* (abundance), *abrār* (piety), *nur* (light), *tathir* (purity), and *mubāhala* (contest of truth claims). The deployment of interpretive methods that seek deeper esoteric meanings of the Qur'an is instrumental in unearthing discourses on social constructs such as gender, which would otherwise remain concealed by the confinement of the text within exoteric understandings.

Islamic spiritual and mystical literature expounds on Fatima's preexistent light, heavenly conception, her *tasbīh*, conversations with celestial beings, and intercessory prerogative on the Day of Judgment. The Shi'a regard Fatima as a medium connecting them to the Prophet, who said, "I am a tree, Fatima is its trunk, and Ali is its pollen. Hasan and Hussain are its fruits, and our followers [the Shi'a] are its leaves. The tree's roots are in the Garden of Eden, and its trunk, fruits, and leaves are in Paradise."⁹⁶ Hence, she occupies a central place in their religious worldview.

However, despite the reverence for Fatima because of her knowledge, spirituality, and God-centric ethics, the gap between the idea of empowering Muslim women and its actual realization in Muslim

⁹⁶ Al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 43:312.

society seems to persist. Female role models are not just revered saints; they can and must serve as inspiration for reform, challenging current unjust systems, and acting for equity in households, communities, and nations. This study advocates for the rekindling and the resuscitation of legacies of premodern Muslim women such as Fatima to address contemporary social justice concerns and give voice to women's experiences rather than muting them in the name of religion and culture.