

A Critical Examination of the Foundations of *Yūsif Shu‘ār*'s View Denying the Possibility and Occurrence of Prophethood and Imamate in Childhood with Reference to Qur'anic Verses and Hadiths

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Abstract

The question of prophethood and Imamate during childhood has been a longstanding topic in Islamic theology, especially within the Shi'a tradition. *Yūsif Shu‘ār*, a contemporary scholar who claims adherence to the Ahl al-Bayt (AS), denies both the possibility and historical occurrence of childhood prophethood by critiquing the Qur'anic verses related to the prophethood of Jesus. As a result, his stance implicitly challenges the legitimacy of the Imamate of certain Shi'a Imams, specifically Imam *Jawād*, Imam *Hādī*, and Imam *Mahdī* (AS), who are believed to have assumed the Imamate at a young age. Employing a descriptive-analytical methodology and an intra-religious critical framework, the present study investigates the foundations of *Shu‘ār*'s argument. By utilizing both rational and transmitted sources, including Qur'anic verses; Hadiths from Sunni and Shi'a traditions, and authoritative commentaries, the analysis demonstrates that the denial of childhood prophethood lacks robust scholarly support. Instead, *Shu‘ār*'s position is based on problematic assumptions, such as conflating prophethood with messengership, overreliance on context, unwarranted interpretation of Qur'anic verses, and neglect of explicit scriptural evidence, including the verse, "And We gave him judgment while still a child," (Maryam: 12) as well as narrations regarding the prophethood of Solomon during childhood. The findings suggest that both prophethood and Imamate are divinely appointed offices, and that God possesses the capacity to grant the requisite intellectual and spiritual perfection to His chosen servants at any age. Additionally, the traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt explicitly differentiate between the ranks of prophet and messenger in childhood and affirm the possibility of Imamate at an early age. Thus, *Shu‘ār*'s position not only contradicts the apparent meaning of the Qur'an and established prophetic tradition, but also, due to its unsound interpretive methodology, marked by excessive and selective reliance on the Qur'an alone, does not succeed in undermining the doctrinal foundations of Twelver Shi'ism regarding prophethood and Imamate in childhood.

Keywords: Prophethood, Imamate, Childhood, *Yūsif Shu‘ār*, Qur'anic Verses and Hadiths.

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1. Introduction

According to the Noble Qur'an, Jesus, while still an infant in the cradle miraculously spoke and proclaimed his prophethood to the people. This account does not appear in any of the four canonical Christian Gospels, although it is reported in certain apocryphal gospels. The story of Jesus speaking from the cradle is found in the "Arabic Infancy Gospel." (The Apocryphal New Testament; Bing, 1975: 80) It should be noted, however, that the text currently known as the "Infancy Gospel of Thomas" narrates the deeds and sayings of Jesus from the ages of five to twelve (cited in Shaker, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 109). Thus, the account of Jesus speaking in the cradle is found exclusively in the "Arabic Infancy Gospel." (ibid.)

According to the teachings of the Qur'an, in addition to Jesus, John was also granted prophethood during childhood, and several Hadiths likewise report that Solomon attained prophethood while still a child. Similarly, Twelver Shi'ism affirms both the possibility and the historical reality of Imamate in childhood, maintaining that Imam *Jawād* (AS) and Imam *Hādī* (AS) assumed the office of Imamate at a young age. More importantly, Twelver Shi'as believe that Imam *Mahdī* (AS), who remains the living but occulted Imam in the present age, also attained the Imamate during childhood.

In addition to the Qur'an, the traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) concerning the prophethood of Jesus, John, and Solomon provide further evidence for the possibility of prophethood and Imamate in childhood. These sources demonstrate that both prophethood and Imamate are purely divine institutions, whose appointment rests solely in the hands of God.

God appoints to prophethood whomever He wills, whether in adulthood or in childhood, just as He appoints to the office of Imamate whomever He wills, whether young or old. One contemporary author who claims to be a follower of the school of the Ahl al-Bayt is *Yūsif Shu'ār* (Subhani, 2016 AD/1395 SH: 28). Nevertheless, by criticizing the Qur'anic verses concerning the prophethood of Jesus, he argues that prophethood in childhood is impossible (*Yūsif Shu'ār*, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 214). In doing so, he evaluates a miraculous divine phenomenon through the lens of limited human reason and linguistic analysis. This approach stands in contrast to that of the overwhelming majority of leading Shi'a and Sunni exegetes (*Ṭabarānī*, 2008: 4, 209; *Ṭabrisī*, 1993 AD/1372 SH: 6, 891; *Rāzī*, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 2, 535).

Although *Shu'ār* does not explicitly address the issue of Imamate, the principles underlying his argument imply that, like prophethood, Imamate also cannot be realized during childhood. It is therefore evident that, based on these premises and arguments, not only the prophethood of certain divine prophets but also the Imamate of Imam *Jawād* (AS), Imam *Hādī* (AS), and Imam *Mahdī* (AS) would be called into question.

The authors of this article maintain that although *Yūsif Shu'ār* claims to be a Shi'a Muslim and a follower of the school of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS), he has, in certain instances, challenged beliefs that are well established and universally accepted among Shi'a Muslims (*Shu'ār*, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 135, 195). In advancing this position, he disregards many well-established principles of Qur'anic interpretation, including the authority of mass-transmitted traditions, the occasions of revelation, and the divinely designated nature of both prophethood

and Imamate. For example, by denying any role for the occasions of revelation in interpreting the Qur'an, he rejects the interpretation of the Verse of the Perfection of Religion as referring to the institution of Imamate (Shu'ār, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 135).

The central question of this study is: What are the foundations of *Yūsif Shu'ār's* view denying the possibility and occurrence of prophethood in childhood, and how can these foundations be critically evaluated in light of the Qur'an and the Hadith literature?

From this principal question, the following subsidiary questions arise:

1. By what interpretive methodology did *Shu'ār* arrive at this conclusion, and what are the shortcomings of that methodology?
2. What evidence supports the possibility of prophethood in childhood?
3. What Qur'anic and Hadith-based evidence establishes the historical occurrence of prophethood and Imamate during childhood?

The principal motivation for critiquing *Shu'ār's* position is to uphold the integrity of Qur'anic teachings. Furthermore, because the principles underlying his argument have the potential to challenge foundational Shi'a doctrines, especially the doctrine of Imamate in childhood, this provides further justification for a critical evaluation. This necessity is heightened by consideration of *Shu'ār's* other views on Shi'a beliefs, which further emphasize the importance of rigorously assessing his interpretive methodology.

This article employs a descriptive, analytical, and critical methodology to examine *Shu'ār's* interpretation of prophethood in childhood. By identifying the underlying rationale and operative principles of his argument, the study critically evaluates these foundations and contends that they necessarily extend to the question of Imamate in childhood.

2. Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-analytical method with an intra-religious critical approach. The research data were collected through library research from the Qur'an, Shi'a and Sunni Qur'anic commentaries, major Hadith collections of both schools, and the published works of *Yūsif Shu'ār*. The analysis is conducted using the methodology of *Ijtihād*-based Qur'anic interpretation and established interpretive principles, including the authoritative status of the apparent meaning of the Qur'an and contextual analysis. The opposing view is first presented accurately and then critically evaluated in light of Qur'anic and Hadith evidence, together with a comparative examination of Shi'a and Sunni scholarly opinions. Finally, the study establishes both the possibility and the historical occurrence of prophethood and Imamate during childhood.

3. Literature Review

Based on his distinctive approach to Qur'anic exegesis, which has been described by some scholars as a form of Qur'an-only methodology, *Yūsif Shu'ār* rejects certain established doctrines accepted by both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. According to this approach, he sometimes confines himself to the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic text while disregarding all reports concerning the occasions of revelation.

From the perspective of Qur'anic exegesis, although reports concerning the occasions of revelation cannot always be regarded as conclusive evidence, particularly because of the

multiplicity and varying reliability of such reports, they cannot be dismissed altogether. In many instances, the historical context provided by the occasions of revelation is indispensable for correctly interpreting the Qur'anic text. Nevertheless, *Shu'ār* argues that the occasions of revelation should play no role in Qur'anic interpretation.

Moreover, his methodology is not applied consistently. Despite his general rejection of occasions of revelation, he occasionally relies upon them in interpreting certain Qur'anic verses. For example, in his discussion of intercession, he accepts the principle of intercession solely on the basis of the occasion of revelation. At the same time, he advances a position that goes even beyond that of the Wahhabi school by rejecting any form of seeking intercession from either the living or the deceased. In doing so, he explicitly contradicts the beliefs of virtually all Muslims and disregards the numerous mass-transmitted narrations concerning intercession found in both Shi'a and Sunni sources (Kulaynī, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 7, 354; Ibn Bābawayh, 1997 AD/1376 SH: 636; Bukhārī, 1989 AD/1410 AH: 1, 296; Muslim ibn Ḥajjāj, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 1, 172; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, 1995 AD/1416 AH: 4, 472; Ibn Mājah, 1997 AD/1418 AH: 5, 677; Ibn Taymīyyah, 1985 AD/1406 AH: 6, 117), while rejecting every form of seeking intercession through either the living or the dead (Yūsif Shu'ār, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 195).

Shu'ār's interpretive methodology has already been critically examined in the article "A Critical Examination of the Evidence for Qur'anism, with Particular Reference to the Views of Mirza Yūsif Shu'ār," by Sayyid Ali Pourmanouchehri and Mohammad Reza Farsiyan, published in *Safineh: Specialized Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies*, no. 58 (Spring 2018 AD/1397 SH). In that study, *Shu'ār* is classified among proponents of the Qur'an-only movement, whose interpretive method excludes reliance upon Hadith, occasions of revelation, mass-transmitted traditions, contextual analysis, and similar exegetical principles.

Likewise, Sayyid Reza Mo'addab and his co-authors, in their article "A Critique of Shi'a Qur'anists in Their Application of the Method of Interpreting the Qur'an through the Sunnah," published in the *Journal of Religious Methodology Studies* (2014 AD/1393 SH), critically evaluate the views of *Shu'ār* and those who share his approach, challenging their methodology of Qur'anic interpretation.

It should be noted that *Shu'ār's* interpretive approach is at variance not only with the methodology of Shi'a exegetes but also with that of the overwhelming majority of Sunni commentators. The present study seeks to examine another aspect of his views, namely, his position regarding prophethood and Imamate during childhood, and to evaluate it in light of the Qur'an and established Prophetic and Imamic traditions.

To date, the only study that has dealt specifically, albeit briefly, with *Shu'ār's* position on prophethood in childhood is "The Correct Interpretation of the Problematic Verses of the Qur'an" by Ayatollah Ja'far Subhani (Tawhid Publications, 2016 AD/1395 SH).

The authors of this article have sought not only to examine *Shu'ār's* explicit statements denying the possibility of prophethood in childhood, but also to identify the underlying premises and logical implications of his views regarding this issue and to subject them to critical evaluation in the light of reason, the Qur'an, and the Sunnah. To the best of the

authors' knowledge, no previous study has undertaken such an analysis in this manner or with this degree of comprehensiveness.

4. Theoretical Foundations of the Study

4.1. The Rational Possibility of Prophethood and Imamate in Childhood

In Islamic thought, prophethood is fundamentally a divine institution determined solely by the will of God. Human reason cannot restrict it by imposing conditions such as a particular age. It should be noted that, from a rational perspective, both prophethood and Imamate during childhood are entirely possible, for God is capable of granting His prophets and Imams the requisite intellectual perfection and maturity even at a young age (Soleymanian Rizi, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 58).

Although the full development of human intellect generally occurs within a particular age range, history demonstrates that exceptional individuals have always existed. There is therefore no rational impediment to God, for the sake of His wisdom and purposes, accelerating this process for certain chosen servants so that they attain intellectual perfection in a much shorter period.

Reason also dictates that the acquisition of knowledge and the reception of divine revelation are not inherently dependent upon physical maturity. God may bestow upon a child extraordinary intelligence and understanding, thereby preparing him to receive divine revelation. Such comprehension and discernment do not necessarily require many years of life or the attainment of a specific age.

Several rational arguments may be advanced in support of this conclusion:

A) The Principle of Divine Grace in Imamiyyah Theology

According to this principle, God provides everything necessary for the guidance of humanity, including the sending of prophets, at the appropriate time. Imamiyyah theologians have traditionally invoked the Principle of Divine Grace to demonstrate the necessity of prophethood. It may further be argued that if divine wisdom requires a prophet to be commissioned during childhood, as in the case of the Prophet John, reason not only regards such a commission as possible but also considers it necessary. Thus, although the Principle of Divine Grace alone may not establish the occurrence of childhood prophethood, when combined with divine wisdom and expediency, it provides a compelling rational basis for its necessity.

B) The Permissibility of a Miracle Preceding the Public Declaration of Prophethood

Islamic theology recognizes the possibility that God may grant miracles to an individual before the formal announcement of his prophethood. Consequently, if a child were to manifest a miracle, such as knowledge of the unseen or extraordinary learning, reason would perceive no obstacle to accepting his prophethood, even if he had not yet reached physical maturity.

C) Distinguishing Between the Duty of Conveying the Message and Prophethood Itself

Reason distinguishes between the essences of prophethood, namely, receiving divine revelation, and the practical responsibilities associated with it. The reception of revelation

may occur during childhood, whereas the public proclamation of the message and the implementation of legal duties, such as leading military campaigns, administering legal punishments, or exercising judicial authority, may be deferred until adulthood. Accordingly, childhood is not an intrinsic obstacle to prophethood itself; rather, it may affect only certain executive or administrative functions.

Indeed, with respect to the childhood of Jesus and John (peace be upon them), the Qur'an refers to their prophethood, not their messengership. This distinction itself indicates that these two divine offices are not identical (Mesbah, 2014 AD/1393 SH: 55).

D) The Absolute Power of God

God is omnipotent and possesses the absolute power to bestow the office of prophethood upon whomever He wills, at whatever age He wills. To restrict the conferral of prophethood to a particular age is, in effect, to impose a limitation upon the absolute power of God.

4.2. Scriptural Evidence (Qur'anic and Hadith-based) for Prophethood and Imamate in Childhood

According to the Qur'an and the traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS), God bestowed special favor upon some of His prophets during their childhood by granting them perfect intellect and understanding, even while they were still infants in the cradle, and by appointing them to the office of prophethood. This understanding is supported by the Qur'an and the Hadith literature and is accepted by the overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars. It is also broadly acknowledged in the field of comparative religion among the adherents of the Abrahamic faiths (Ṭabarānī, 2008: 4, 209; Ṭabrisī, 1952 AD/1372 AH: 6, 891; Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 21, 535; Shaker, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 109).

Numerous Qur'anic verses and widely accepted Hadiths recognized across the various Islamic schools provide evidence for this doctrine. Among the most significant scriptural proofs are the verses concerning the prophethood of Jesus and John, together with the narrations reporting that Solomon was commissioned as a prophet during childhood.

Several Qur'anic verses and narrations establish the possibility and historical occurrence of prophethood and Imamate during childhood. Some of these are presented below.

4.2.1. The Argument from the Prophethood of Jesus

God says in Surah Maryam:

"Then she pointed to him. They said, 'How can we speak to one who is in the cradle, a child?' He said, 'Indeed, I am a servant of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet.'" (Maryam: 29-30)

This verse refers to the miraculous event in which Jesus, while still an infant in the cradle, spoke to the people. In his miraculous speech, he declared:

"Indeed, I am a servant of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet."

The verse explicitly affirms that Jesus was a prophet during his childhood, indeed, while still lying in the cradle. His declaration, "He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet," leaves no room for denying the plain meaning of the text. There is no legitimate

basis for abandoning the explicit wording of the verse or engaging in interpretive speculation that lacks any textual or contextual support in order to avoid its clear implication.

4.2.2. The Argument from the Prophethood of John

Elsewhere in Surah Maryam, God declares: "O John! Hold firmly to the Scripture." And we granted him judgment while still a child. (Maryam: 12) According to the interpretation adopted in this study, this verse explicitly states that God granted John the authority of prophethood during his childhood. The plain meaning of the verse cannot reasonably be set aside. When this verse is considered together with the principle that God is fully capable of bestowing complete intellect, maturity, and sound judgment upon His prophets even in childhood, the argument becomes complete.

In other words, rational evidence establishes the possibility of prophethood during childhood, while scriptural evidence, derived from both the Qur'an and the Sunnah, establishes its actual occurrence and demonstrates that, in certain cases, childhood prophethood formed part of the divine plan.

4.2.3. The Argument from the Prophethood of Solomon During Childhood

Several narrations report that the Prophet Solomon attained prophethood during his childhood. Two examples are presented below.

A) One of our companions narrated: "I said to Imam *Muhammad Taqī* (AS), "People object to your young age." The Imam replied: "God revealed to David that he should appoint Solomon as his successor, even though Solomon was still a child tending sheep. The scholars and worshippers among the Children of Israel objected to this decision. God then revealed to David: "Collect the staffs of those who object and also the staff of Solomon. Place them all inside a house and seal its door with the seals of those very people. The next day, whichever staff member becomes green and produces leaves and fruit belongs to the one who is My chosen successor." David informed them accordingly, and they replied, "We are satisfied, and we accept."

This narration explicitly states that Solomon was appointed to prophethood during his childhood (Kulaynī, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 2, 282).

B) Another narration with essentially the same content appears in the Hadith literature: "David intended to appoint Solomon as his successor because God Almighty had revealed to him that he should do so. When he informed the Children of Israel, they protested angrily: "Will you appoint a child as your successor while there are older men among us?" David then summoned the tribes of the Children of Israel and said, "Your objection has reached me. Bring me your staffs. Whichever staff grows will belong to the one who shall be the divinely appointed authority after me." They agreed. David instructed each of them to write his name upon his staff. Each did so. Solomon also came forward, wrote his name upon his staff, and placed it together with the others inside a house. The door was locked, and the chiefs of the Children of Israel stood guard over it. The following morning, after performing the dawn prayer with them, David opened the house. When the staffs were brought out, Solomon's staff had sprouted fresh leaves and borne fruit. They therefore handed the staff to David..." (Majlisī, 1982 AD/1403 AH: 13, 447; Ibn Bābawayh, 1975 AD/1395 AH: 1, 156)

These two narrations, which are substantially identical in content, corroborate one another. Certain details contained in the second narration are particularly noteworthy. Most significantly, instead of using the word "Successor," it employs the expression "Divinely appointed authority." This wording appears to emphasize the divine and appointive nature of prophethood itself. Such an understanding further supports the argument advanced in this study: "If prophethood is a divinely appointed office, then every aspect of that appointment rests exclusively in God's hands."

Indeed, the wording of the second narration negates any independent role for people in God's appointments. This is consistent with numerous traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt, in which they declare:

"That matter belongs to God; He places it wherever He wills." (Kulaynī, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 2, 81; Fayḍ Kāshānī, 1985 AD/1406 AH: 2, 363)

These traditions may therefore be regarded as further corroborating the substance of the above narrations.

Moreover, the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) themselves have cited the Qur'anic verses concerning Jesus and John as evidence for both prophethood and Imamate during childhood (Kulaynī, 2008 AD/1429 AH: 1, 322; Fayḍ Kāshānī, 1985 AD/1406 AH: 2, 377; Āmilī, 2004 AD/1425 AH: 4, 383).

An important point should be emphasized: "By stressing the divinely appointed nature of the office of prophethood, the two narrations concerning Solomon support not only the possibility and historical occurrence of prophethood during childhood, but also, by analogy, the possibility of Imamate during childhood."

It should also be noted, however, that although the two narrations concerning Solomon's childhood prophethood are recorded in authoritative Hadith collections, and many later hadith scholars included them in their own works out of reliance upon the authority of *Kulaynī* and *Ṣadūq* (Fayḍ Kāshānī, 1985 AD/1406 AH: 2, 377; Majlisī, 1982 AD/1403 AH: 14, 81; Baḥrānī, 1992 AD/1413 AH: 7, 278), their chains of transmission are open to criticism. For this reason, they are cited here only as corroborative evidence rather than as primary proofs.

By contrast, the Qur'anic evidence, the other narrations of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS), and the historical evidence concerning the prophethood of Jesus and John during childhood are not subject to such difficulties and remain sound and unproblematic as evidentiary sources.

5. The Similarity Between the Offices of Imamate and Prophethood

Prophethood and Imamate are both divinely instituted offices. Although they differ in certain respects, they share numerous essential characteristics, including divinely bestowed knowledge, impeccability, spiritual and ontological authority, and the obligation of obedience to their holders.

In the course of a lengthy discussion in the court of *Ma'mūn*, Imam *Riḍā* (AS) stated: "...The Imam is chosen only by God and according to His will, on the basis of His prior election, nobility of lineage, purity of origin, and future infallibility..." (Ibn Bābawayh, 2008 AD/1387 SH: 2, 196; Majlisī, 1982 AD/1403 AH: 49, 203; Baḥrānī Iṣfahānī, 1992 AD/1413 AH: 22, 323)

Accordingly, any argument advanced to establish prophethood may also be employed to establish Imamate, since these two divine offices share many fundamental attributes, most notably that both are conferred solely through divine appointment.

Indeed, in the traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS), the principal argument used to establish the legitimacy of Imamate during childhood is precisely the proof of prophethood during childhood. In other words, by demonstrating that God appointed certain prophets while they were still children, the Imams established the validity of the Imamate of figures such as Imam *Jawād*, Imam *Hādī*, and Imam *Mahdī* (AS), all of whom assumed the office of Imamate at a young age.

For this reason, if *Yūsif Shu'ār* denies the prophethood of God's prophets during childhood, he cannot consistently maintain belief in Imamate during childhood, because he has rejected the very middle premise upon which the traditional proof of childhood Imamate is based. In this respect, it makes no difference whether or not he explicitly discusses the doctrine of Imamate; the logical implications of his argument inevitably extend to it.

6. *Yūsif Shu'ār's* View Concerning Prophethood and Imamate in Childhood

Yūsif Shu'ār maintains that prophethood during childhood is impossible. Although his arguments are directed specifically toward the Qur'anic verses concerning the childhood prophethood of Jesus, son of Mary, they are principally aimed at denying that the verse, "He said, "Indeed, I am a servant of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet," (Maryam: 30) indicates that Jesus was already a prophet while still an infant.

Although *Shu'ār* presents numerous arguments, the substance of his position may be summarized as follows.

6.1. Customary and Legal Maturity as a Condition for Prophethood

Shu'ār argues that Jesus was not a prophet while in the cradle. According to him, the infant Jesus speaking from the cradle was merely a miracle performed by God, and Jesus himself was not consciously aware of the meaning of the words he uttered. He reasons that since an infant in the cradle lacks understanding and awareness, it is impossible for such a child to speak knowingly.

In his view, God caused Jesus to speak solely as a miracle in order to defend the honor and chastity of the Virgin Mary. By means of this miraculous event, God vindicated Mary before her people.

Shu'ār does not deny that Jesus eventually became a prophet. Rather, he argues that God commissioned him only later, after he had reached the age of intellectual maturity and full development. Thus, according to *Shu'ār*, Jesus was not a prophet during childhood.

He writes: "Jesus was never a prophet while in the cradle, and it is meaningless to speak of his messengership at that time. Certainly, when Jesus began to speak, he himself did not know what he was saying; rather, he spoke solely through the will and power of God..." (*Shu'ār*, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 213-215)

These statements indicate that the author regards legal maturity and customary adulthood as prerequisites for prophethood. On this basis, he rejects not only the historical occurrence of Jesus' prophethood during childhood but also its very possibility.

In other words, *Shu'ār* considers complete intellectual comprehension and mature understanding to be essential conditions for prophethood. Since he assumes that such qualities cannot exist in childhood, he concludes that childhood prophethood is both rationally impossible and historically impossible.

An important point should be emphasized. Both prophethood and Imamate are divine offices, and they share several essential characteristics, particularly their appointive and divinely ordained nature. Consequently, once the possibility of prophethood during childhood is established, the possibility of Imamate during childhood follows as well.

Indeed, the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) themselves relied upon these very Qur'anic verses and narrations to establish the legitimacy of the Imamate of certain Imams during childhood, making their argument both complete and conclusive. Imam *Jawād* (AS) explicitly stated in one narration:

"Indeed, God employs the same proof for Imamate that He employs for prophethood." (Kulaynī, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 1, 494)

6.2. The Absence of the Gospel in Jesus' Hands While in the Cradle

Shu'ār argues that Jesus could not have been a prophet during his childhood because he did not physically possess the Gospel while in the cradle. He writes:

"Jesus was never in the cradle holding the Gospel in his hands so that he could show it to the people." (Shu'ār, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 215)

In other words, since the infant Jesus did not have the Gospel in his hands, he could not have been commissioned as a prophet while still in the cradle. According to *Shu'ār*, had Jesus truly been appointed to prophethood at that time, the Gospel should have been physically present with him in accordance with his declaration. Since this was not the case, his statement cannot be understood as referring to an actual, present prophethood.

Anticipating the objection that the Qur'an explicitly states, "And He has made me a prophet," (Maryam: 30) *Shu'ār* responds that the verse refers to Jesus' future prophethood. Because this future event was certain to occur, classical Arabic permits it to be expressed in the past tense (ibid.). Thus, according to *Shu'ār*, God was merely informing people that Jesus would later be commissioned as a prophet after attaining legal and intellectual maturity. Consequently, he argues that the verse does not describe Jesus' actual prophethood while he was still an infant.

It should be noted that some Qur'anic commentators have attributed this interpretation to a group of earlier exegetes (Ṭūsī, n.d.: 7, 123; Ṭabrisī, 1952 AD/1372 AH: 6, 792). However, despite investigation, the identity of this group has not been clearly established.

6.3. Reliance on the Context of the Verses of Surah Maryam

By context is meant the literary and contextual coherence of the Qur'anic text, including the sequence of sentences and the arrangement of words and verses.

Throughout his work, *Shu'ār* repeatedly treats contextual coherence as a decisive interpretive principle and, in certain cases, including the verses of Surah Maryam, considers it binding and not open to qualification (Shu'ār, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 136).

He argues that the verse concerning Jesus' speech in the cradle must be interpreted together with the preceding verses because they all form a single context whose primary purpose is to protect the life, honor, and reputation of the Virgin Mary. In "The Interpretation of the Problematic Verses," while accepting that Jesus' speech from the cradle was miraculous, *Shu'ār* maintains that it was merely a miracle granted by God to defend Mary's honor. He therefore argues that the verse is not intended to establish Jesus' prophethood.

He further observes that the preceding verses also recount several miraculous events associated with Mary, including the virgin birth of Jesus and the falling of fresh dates from a withered palm tree. Consequently, he argues that Jesus' speech from the cradle should likewise be understood as simply another miracle of the same kind, unrelated to the question of his prophethood during childhood (*Shu'ār*, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 213).

In other words, by relying on the contextual flow of the preceding verses, *Shu'ār* interprets the verse in question as belonging to the same category of miraculous events and therefore categorically rejects the notion that Jesus was a prophet during childhood. It thus appears that one of the principal foundations of his interpretation is his reliance upon the contextual sequence of the verses.

6.4. The Parallel Between Prophethood and Imamate

An important observation is that although *Shu'ār* explicitly discusses only prophethood, the implications of his arguments necessarily extend to the doctrine of Imamate. This is because Imamate resembles prophethood in several essential respects, including divinely bestowed authority, both ontological and legislative, and its status as a divinely appointed office.

Accordingly, the operative rationale underlying *Shu'ār's* argument can readily be extended to Imamate. On this basis, his position effectively implies that a child cannot attain the office of Imamate.

The authors contend that, although *Shu'ār* does not explicitly state this conclusion, he implicitly calls into question the legitimacy of those Shi'a Imams who assumed the Imamate during childhood, despite presenting himself as a Shi'a Muslim (Subhani, 2016 AD/1395 SH: 28).

However, his failure to mention Imamate expressly does not preclude a direct critique of his position. The denial of prophethood during childhood necessarily entails the denial of Imamate during childhood as well, since the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) themselves relied upon the former as evidence for the latter. For this reason, the authors of the present study examine and critique *Shu'ār's* position with respect to both doctrines (Kulaynī, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 1, 494).

7. A Critique of Yūsif Shu'ār's Position on Prophethood and Imamate

Shu'ār's position may be critically evaluated from several different perspectives. Some of the principal criticisms are presented in the following sections.

7.1. An Unsupported Assertion

Apart from being contrary to the views of the overwhelming majority of Muslim exegetes and theologians (Ṭabarānī, 2008: 4, 209; Ṭabrisī, 1952 AD/1372 AH: 6, 891; Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 21, 535; Ṭūsī, n.d.: 4, 55; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1970 AD/1390 AH: 3, 176), and inconsistent with

the beliefs of the followers of the Abrahamic religions (Shaker, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 109), *Shu'ār's* claim is unsupported by evidence. It rests solely upon an analogy between a miraculously gifted child and ordinary children.

The fundamental question is this: "If God is capable of enabling an infant to speak while still in the cradle, is He not also capable of granting that same child complete intellect, wisdom, and understanding sufficient for prophethood?"

If prophethood and Imamate are accepted as divinely bestowed offices, then making customary adulthood or a particular age a prerequisite for either office effectively amounts to denying God's power to bestow perfect intellect upon a child. Such a position is inconsistent with the principle of divine sovereignty in legislation.

Just as God grants the office of prophethood, He is equally capable of bestowing divinely inspired knowledge and complete intellectual perfection during childhood, since these offices are entirely divine in origin and beyond the scope of human determination.

The Qur'an declares concerning John: "And We granted him judgment while still a child." (Maryam: 12)

The conferral of judgment, wisdom, or authority necessarily presupposes sufficient intellect and discernment. Accordingly, both the rational possibility and the historical occurrence of childhood prophethood are established. Childhood, therefore, is not an intrinsic obstacle to divine appointment, even though the office itself entails its own unique qualifications.

7.2. Failure to Distinguish Between Prophethood and Law-Bearing Messengership

It appears that *Shu'ār* does not distinguish adequately between the two divine offices of prophethood and messengership. His objection, that because Jesus, when he declared, "Indeed, He has given me the Scripture," did not physically possess the Gospel in his hands, he therefore could not have been a prophet during childhood, seems to arise from precisely this confusion.

As a consequence of conflating these two offices, *Shu'ār* is compelled to reinterpret the apparent, and indeed explicit, meaning of the Qur'anic verse. He argues that God would appoint Jesus to prophethood only at a later time, so that the verse merely refers to a certain future event rather than to Jesus' actual status during infancy.

In response, it should be observed that when Jesus declared, "He has given me the Scripture," this does not necessarily mean that he was physically holding the Gospel in his hands. Human knowledge and divine revelation are not located in one's hands so as to require the physical possession of a written book.

Nowhere in the Qur'an or the Hadith literature does God's statement that He has "Given" or "Sent down" a Scripture to a prophet imply that the prophet must immediately possess a written volume. Rather, it signifies that God has revealed divine knowledge and guidance to the prophet's heart and soul. This interpretation is also supported by the traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS).

For example, a narration from Imam *Jawād* (AS) states: "The narrator said: "I asked Imam *Jawād* whether Jesus, when he spoke in the cradle, was God's proof over the people of his own time."

The Imam replied: "At that time, Jesus was a prophet and God's proof over the people, but he was not yet a messenger. Have you not heard his own words when he said: "Indeed, I am the servant of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet. He has made me blessed wherever I may be, and He has enjoined upon me prayer and almsgiving as long as I live."

I then asked, "So while he was still a child in the cradle, was he God's proof over the Prophet Zechariah?"

The Imam replied: "At that time, Jesus was a sign from God for all people and a mercy from God for the Virgin Mary. When he spoke, he was a prophet and God's proof over everyone who heard his voice. Thereafter, Jesus remained silent until the age of two, while Zechariah continued to be God's proof over the people during that period. After Zechariah passed away, John inherited from him the Scripture and wisdom while still a young child. Have you not heard the saying of God: "O John! Hold firmly to the Scripture, and We granted him judgment while still a child? Then, when Jesus reached the age of seven, God revealed to him, and he proclaimed himself to be both a prophet and a messenger. From that time onward, at the age of seven, he became God's proof over John and over all mankind." (Kulaynī, *ibid*: 1, 382; Baḥrānī, 1954 AD/1374 AH: 3, 74)

According to this narration, the Ahl al-Bayt explicitly distinguish between prophethood and messengership. Jesus possessed the office of prophethood and served as God's proof while still an infant in the cradle, whereas his public mission as a messenger was associated with a later stage of his life. This distinction directly addresses *Shu'ār's* objection and demonstrates that the Qur'anic declaration of Jesus' prophethood during infancy need not imply that he had already commenced his public mission as a law-bearing messenger.

As is evident from this narration, in addition to clarifying various stages of Jesus' life, it also affirms the prophethood and messengership of John. It should be noted that the distinction between a prophet and a messenger can likewise be derived from this narration. In other words, based on this Hadith, it may be concluded that Jesus was a prophet while still in the cradle, whereas he attained the rank of messengership at the age of seven. Likewise, John attained prophethood and divine wisdom from the age of two and thereby became God's proof over the people.

Accordingly, *Shu'ār* may be criticized for treating prophethood as necessarily synonymous with messengership and the possession of an independent revealed law. This conflation appears to have given rise to his misunderstanding. In reality, however, these two offices are distinct, as is explicitly demonstrated by the above narration. Moreover, the Qur'an itself states, "He made me a prophet," not "He made me a messenger."

To explain the distinction briefly: a messenger is entrusted with a particular divine message through which God's proof is conclusively established against the people. By contrast, a prophet does not necessarily fulfill this function. As God states in the Qur'an: "Messengers as bearers of glad tidings and warners, so that mankind would have no argument

against Allah after the coming of the messengers and Allah is Ever All-Powerful, All-Wise." (al-Nisā': 165) (Misbah, 2014 AD/1393 SH: 55)

In response to *Shu'ār's* concern, it may therefore be said that Jesus was indeed commissioned to prophethood while still in the cradle, whereas his messengership commenced several years later. This is precisely the distinction that *Shu'ār* appears to have overlooked.

7.3. Interpreting the Verse on Jesus' Childhood Prophethood as Referring to a Certain Future Event: An Unwarranted and Unsupported Interpretation

Interpreting the verse concerning Jesus' prophethood as referring exclusively to a future event is an unwarranted and unjustified interpretation.

Interpreting a statement as referring to a future event that is certain to occur is appropriate only when the event has not yet taken place, and there is evidence indicating that it will certainly occur in the future. For example, God says in the Qur'an: "When the Inevitable Event occurs, there will be no denying its occurrence." (al-Wāqī'ah: 1-2)

Since the event in question, the Day of Resurrection, has not yet occurred and its effects have not yet become manifest, it is natural to understand the verse as referring to a future event whose occurrence is certain.

The case of Jesus' prophethood during childhood is fundamentally different. There is no justification for interpreting the verse as referring merely to a future certainty without supporting evidence. Rather, the verse must be understood according to its apparent, indeed explicit, meaning, namely, that Jesus possessed the office of prophethood during his infancy.

Only if there were compelling evidence demonstrating that Jesus had not been commissioned as a prophet during childhood would it be legitimate to interpret the verse as referring to a future event. In that case, the verse could properly be understood as describing a future, certain occurrence. However, *Shu'ār* has failed to present any convincing evidence that Jesus was not appointed to prophethood during his childhood. Consequently, his interpretation lacks an adequate evidentiary basis.

An interpretation that departs from the apparent meaning of the text without a valid justification is not only flawed from a methodological and semantic standpoint, but is also inconsistent with the principles of Arabic linguistics and Islamic legal hermeneutics (Khurāsānī, 2014 AD/1435 AH: 1, 345). Interestingly, throughout his book "The Interpretation of the Problematic Verses," *Shu'ār* repeatedly rejects precisely this interpretive approach, insisting that one has no right to abandon the apparent meaning of the Qur'an under any circumstances (*Shu'ār*, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 136). Yet, in his interpretation of this very verse, he abandons the interpretive principle that he himself consistently advocates elsewhere.

7.4. A Critique of *Shu'ār's* Reliance on Context

With respect to *Shu'ār's* appeal to the contextual flow of the verses, he argues that the verse in question, together with the preceding verses, merely constitutes a series of miracles granted to the Virgin Mary and bears no connection to Jesus' prophethood. He writes:

"The preceding verses explain that Jesus was born to Mary without a father through God's miraculous power. Mary said, "Would that I had died before this..." At that moment,

the infant spoke, saying, "Do not grieve, O mother; your Lord has placed a stream beneath you. Shake the trunk of the palm tree, and fresh ripe dates will fall upon you. Eat, drink, and be comforted. If you encounter anyone, indicate by gesture that you have vowed to fast and therefore will not speak today." Then, when she came to her people carrying the child, they said, "O Mary, you have committed a grave deed!" Mary pointed toward the child, and the infant spoke, saying, "Indeed, I am the servant of Allah. He has given me the Scripture..." (Shu'ār, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 214)

In reality, *Shu'ār* employs contextual reasoning not only in the interpretation of this verse but also in several other Qur'anic passages, where, according to the authors, it leads him to substantially distort the intended meaning of the text (ibid: 136).

Context is indeed one of the recognized aids in determining the apparent meaning of a text. However, it is well established in the principles of legal interpretation that the apparent meaning possesses evidentiary authority only so long as there is no stronger evidence to the contrary (Khurāsānī, ibid: 352).

In the present case, the verse explicitly affirms Jesus' prophethood. Consequently, there is no justification for abandoning this explicit statement merely on the basis of contextual considerations. Furthermore, the preceding verses, which recount the miracles bestowed upon Mary, are not incompatible with the conclusion that Jesus was already a prophet during childhood. It is entirely possible to preserve the contextual unity of the passage while simultaneously recognizing that the verse explicitly establishes Jesus' prophethood. Indeed, a number of scholars have expressly adopted this interpretation (Majlisī, 1983 AD/1404 AH: 5, 287).

7.5. Failure to Consider the Qur'anic Verses on John's Prophethood and the Narrations Concerning Solomon's Prophethood

As has become evident, *Shu'ār* bases his argument exclusively on the verses concerning Jesus. However, he does not address the Qur'anic verses concerning the prophethood of John, despite their explicit wording. Likewise, he makes no reference to the narrations reporting that the Prophet Solomon attained prophethood during childhood.

This omission is significant, for these additional Qur'anic and Hadith-based evidences independently support the possibility and historical occurrence of childhood prophethood. By restricting his analysis to a single passage while overlooking other relevant scriptural evidence, *Shu'ār's* treatment of the subject remains incomplete and methodologically deficient.

Even if, for the sake of argument, one were to accept *Shu'ār's* explanations regarding the verses of Surah Maryam that concern Jesus, it would still be impossible to disregard the other Qur'anic verses and narrations relating to the remaining prophets. One cannot simply overlook the verse that explicitly affirms the prophethood of John during childhood:

"O John! Hold firmly to the Scripture, and We granted him judgment while still a child." (Maryam: 12)

Disregarding this verse, together with the numerous traditions transmitted and accepted among both the Shi'a and Sunni schools as part of the Prophetic and Ahl al-Bayt tradition (cf.

Zamakhsharī, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 1, 360; Qurṭubī, 1944 AD/1364 AH: 11, 87; Durrah, 2009 AD/1430 AH: 5, 570; Sabzevari, 1985 AD/1406 AH: 2, 50), constitutes an unsupported interpretation and a distortion of the clear textual evidence. Likewise, the unanimous position of the major Shi'a and Sunni exegetes affirming John's prophethood during childhood cannot simply be ignored (ibid; Ṭabarānī, 2008: 4, 21).

An even more significant point is that, with respect to John, the Qur'an contains two complementary verses. In one verse, God states: "O John! Hold firmly to the Scripture, and We granted him judgment while still a child." (Maryam: 12)

Elsewhere, God says: "Then the angels called out to him while he was standing in prayer in the sanctuary: "Indeed, Allah gives you glad tidings of John, confirming a Word from Allah, noble, chaste, and a prophet from among the righteous." (Āli 'Imrān: 39)

Regarding the word "*Ḥaṣūran*" (self-restraint) a narration from Imam *Ṣādiq* (AS) explains:

"*Ḥaṣūran* refers to one who exercises exceptional self-restraint and does not engage in idle amusement. It has been related that when John was a child, he encountered other children who invited him to play. He replied, I was not created for play."

This narration has been transmitted so extensively that it approaches the level of mass-transmitted in the major Shi'a and Sunni commentaries (Zamakhsharī, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 1, 360; Qurṭubī, 1944 AD/1364 AH: 11, 87; Durrah, 2009 AD/1430 AH: 5, 570; Sabzevari, 1985 AD/1406 AH: 2, 50).

As is evident, Maryam: 12 refer not only to the Scripture but also to judgment. Here, judgment cannot mean a written book; rather, it denotes the authority of prophethood, together with the wisdom, discernment, intellect, and sound judgment that accompany it.

Moreover, in other Qur'anic passages concerning prophets such as David and Moses, the expression "We gave him judgment and knowledge" appears after they had reached maturity. In those contexts, judgment signifies prophetic authority, wisdom, intelligence, and sound judgment. By contrast, in the case of John, the verse explicitly adds the qualifier "While still a child," thereby emphasizing the exceptional possibility of God bestowing these divine gifts during childhood and distinguishing this case from the ordinary course of human development.

Accordingly, *Shu'ār*'s objection, that Jesus could not have been a prophet because he did not physically possess a written Gospel while in the cradle, loses its force. The Qur'an itself demonstrates that divine judgment refers not to the physical possession of a written scripture, but to the conferral of prophetic authority, wisdom, and divinely granted understanding.

Furthermore, the above-mentioned narration concerning this verse explicitly portrays John as possessing complete intellectual and spiritual maturity during childhood, the very possibility that *Shu'ār* considers impossible in the case of Jesus.

Given this body of Qur'anic evidence and widely transmitted narrations, one must ask: 'How can all of these verses and traditions be set aside and the explicit wording of the Qur'an reinterpreted solely on the basis of a single author's subjective conjecture?'

Conclusion

The present study critically examined *Yūsif Shu'ār's* arguments denying the possibility of prophethood during childhood and extended their implications to the doctrine of Imamate. It demonstrates that his position is untenable for several reasons:

1) An Unsupported Claim

By drawing an analogy between ordinary children and divinely chosen prophets, *Shu'ār* asserts, without presenting any sound rational or textual evidence, that legal and customary maturity is a prerequisite for prophethood. However, God is fully capable of granting complete intellect and the necessary wisdom to His chosen servants even during childhood, as explicitly stated concerning the prophethood of John: "And We granted him judgment while still a child." (Maryam: 12)

2) Confusion Between Prophethood and Messengership

Shu'ār's objection, that Jesus could not have been a prophet in the cradle because he did not physically possess the Gospel, results from his failure to distinguish between the office of prophethood, which entails receiving divine revelation and serving as God's proof, and messengership, which involves publicly conveying an independent divine law. The narrations of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) clearly indicate that Jesus was a prophet while still in the cradle, though not yet a messenger, and that his messengership began when he reached the age of seven.

3) An Unwarranted Interpretation of the Qur'anic Verse

Shu'ār's interpretation of the verse, "Indeed, I am the servant of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet," referring exclusively to a future event is unsupported by any credible evidence. Moreover, it conflicts with both the principles of Islamic legal hermeneutics and the conventions of classical Arabic, in which the perfect tense ordinarily denotes the completion or certainty of an action.

4) Improper Reliance on Context

Although the surrounding verses in Surah Maryam recount a series of miracles granted to Mary, this does not preclude the verse from simultaneously affirming Jesus' prophethood during childhood. The contextual flow of the passage cannot override the verse's explicit wording. Indeed, numerous Qur'anic commentators have harmonized the contextual unity of the passage with the clear affirmation of Jesus' childhood prophethood.

5) Neglect of Other Qur'anic Verses and Prophetic Traditions

Shu'ār confines his discussion to the verse concerning Jesus while overlooking the explicit Qur'anic evidence regarding John's prophethood during childhood, as well as the numerous narrations concerning Solomon's prophethood in his youth. Collectively, these scriptural and traditional sources provide strong support for both the possibility and the historical occurrence of childhood prophethood.

6) The Necessity of Affirming Childhood Imamate Within Shi'a Theology

Given the essential similarity between prophethood and Imamate as divinely ordained and appointive institutions, and considering that the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) themselves cited these very verses in support of Imamate during childhood, denying the possibility of childhood prophethood logically undermines the Imamate of figures such as Imam *Jawād* (AS), Imam *Hādī* (AS), and the Twelfth Imam, *Mahdī* (AJ). Such a conclusion stands in direct contradiction to the established doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that both prophethood and Imamate during childhood are not only rationally possible but are also textually established by the Qur'an and authentic Islamic tradition. They therefore constitute an integral component of Islamic doctrine, particularly within the Shi'a theological tradition. Owing to its flawed interpretive methodology, characterized by an excessive form of Qur'an-only hermeneutics, disregard for the authoritative Sunnah, and departure from the consensus of the major Qur'anic commentators, *Yūsif Shu'ār's* position is not sustainable. Consequently, it cannot undermine the firmly established Qur'anic and Hadith-based foundations supporting the doctrines of childhood prophethood and childhood Imamate.

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