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Tawassul in View of the Holy Quran and the Islamic Sources

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Abstract

This study investigates the concept of tawassul—seeking a means of approach to God—from the perspective of the Qur’ān and other Islamic sources. To achieve this goal, numerous Sunni and Shi‘i texts—primarily Sunni works—were examined, and a selection of the most authoritative sources was chosen as the foundation of the analysis. Employing a descriptive-analytical method, the research explores and compares diverse perspectives on the meaning, types, and applications of tawassul. The study also compares interpretations across traditions to clarify the relation between intercession and monotheism. The findings demonstrate that, according to the Qur’ān and Islamic tradition, the mediating entity may at times consist of righteous deeds and sincere acts of worship, and at other times a noble individual who enjoys a divinely granted rank and esteem. The study further reveals that tawassul has been widely acknowledged and practiced as an ancient religious tradition through which believers seek closeness to God. It eventually suggests that tawassul—when performed in accordance with divine instruction—does not constitute shirk (polytheism) but rather reinforces tawḥīd (monotheism). In other word, tawassul reaffirms tawhid by acknowledging that all mediation operates solely through God’s will.

Keywords: Qur’ān, Islamic sources, tawassul, tawḥīd, shirk, istishfā’.

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1. Introduction

Tawassul refers to the act of seeking divine assistance or intercession through an intermediary such as a prophet, saint, or righteous individual. In Islamic theology, it signifies employing a wasilah (means) to draw nearer to God and obtain His favor. While the principle is widely acknowledged across Islamic traditions, its modes of application vary. In Sunni thought, tawassul is generally accepted but practiced differently: some scholars restrict it to the Prophet Muhammad, whereas others extend it to other virtuous believers. In Shia Islam, tawassul constitutes an integral part of devotion and is closely associated with the Ahl al-Bayt (the family of the Prophet), who are considered divinely chosen mediators whose intercession operates solely by God's permission.

Controversy over tawassul typically arises in relation to tawhid, the doctrine of absolute monotheism that forms the foundation of Islamic belief. The Qur'an and Prophetic teachings establish tawhid as the central message of all prophets, beginning with the call to proclaim God's oneness. Following the Prophet's death, theological and political disputes concerning leadership led to divergent interpretations. Those who remained loyal to the Prophet's family, recognizing their divinely inspired knowledge, came to be identified as the Shia of Ali ibn Abi Talib. Shia scholars maintain that Imam Ali and his descendants exemplified perfect monotheism, serving as models of spiritual guidance and devotion. The accusation that Shia Muslims attribute divine powers to the Imams stems from misunderstanding the nature of tawassul. In Shia theology, the Imams possess no independent authority; rather, they function as means through which God manifests His mercy and responds to supplications. Thus, tawassul, correctly understood, reinforces rather than contradicts tawhid, emphasizing that all intercession derives from God alone.

This study aims to delve into this subject by examining Quranic verses and noble traditions, both from Sunni and Shia sources, to specifically explore and compare the perspectives on intercession and seeking help from the Sunni and Shia school of thought. The study struggles to confirm that intercession and seeking help ultimately lead back to tawhid, rather than contradicting it. To do so, the study adopts

a descriptive-analytical research method. Primary and secondary Islamic sources were examined through textual and comparative analysis, focusing on Qur'anic verses, Prophetic traditions, and authoritative Sunni and Shia commentaries. Rather than relying solely on doctrinal interpretation, the study critically describes and analyzes key theological arguments to present an integrated view of tawassul as reflected in Islamic scripture and tradition.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge the interpretive gap between Sunni and Shia perspectives on tawassul. The topic is not only a recurring theme in classical theology but also a point of contemporary intra-faith dialogue and misunderstanding. By re-examining tawassul through authentic Qur'anic and Hadith sources, the paper clarifies its theological legitimacy and demonstrates that when properly understood, tawassul reinforces rather than contradicts the unity of God (tawhid). Hence, this research contributes to promoting inter-sectarian understanding and reviving classical Islamic scholarship in modern discourse. For the purposes of this study, the following research question is adopted:

What is the theological nature and legitimacy of tawassul according to the Qur'an and Islamic sources, and how does its proper understanding affirm rather than compromise the principle of divine unity (tawhid)?

2. Literature Review

A considerable body of scholarship, both classical and modern, has addressed the question of tawassul within the broader framework of Islamic theology, jurisprudence, and spirituality. Early Sunni scholars such as Subkī (1935), Samhūdī (1908), and Qastallānī (2008) discussed the permissibility of seeking intercession through the Prophet Muhammad and the righteous as a means sanctioned by revelation. Their works generally concluded that when tawassul is performed with the understanding that only God possesses ultimate authority, it remains a legitimate devotional act. In contrast, later reformist voices—most notably Ibn Taymiyya (2001, 2002)—critiqued certain popular practices, arguing that they could blur the distinction between reverence

and worship. However, even Ibn Taymiyya acknowledged that invoking God while mentioning the Prophet's rank does not constitute polytheism.

Within the Shia tradition, exegetes such as Ṭabāṭabā'ī (1995) and philosophers like Mullā Ṣadrā (1998) offered systematic treatments of intercession, grounding it in Qur'anic ontology and divine causality. They emphasized that intercession and mediation operate only by God's will, thereby reinforcing monotheism. Contemporary Shia theologians such as Subḥānī (n.d.) and Mutahhari (1973, 1991) have further elaborated these ideas, stressing that tawassul expresses obedience to divine command rather than reliance on independent intermediaries.

Modern academic studies have also explored tawassul from sociological and comparative perspectives. Ayoub (1978) examined devotional dimensions of 'Āshūrā' rituals to show how the practice of seeking intercession reflects collective piety and historical memory. Madelung (1997) contextualized early debates on authority and succession, illustrating how theological differences on tawassul were intertwined with political developments after the Prophet's death. More recently, interdisciplinary works by Hemami and Karbaschi (2013) have traced philosophical and hadith foundations of mediation in Mullā Ṣadrā's writings, demonstrating the continuity between classical and modern interpretations.

Across these studies, a shared recognition emerges that tawassul—understood as seeking God's favor through divinely approved means—has deep Qur'anic roots, particularly in Q 5:35 and 4:64. The main divergence lies not in the legitimacy of tawassul itself but in its modalities: whether it should be restricted to the Prophet during his lifetime or extended to the saints and righteous after his death. Sunni jurists such as Suyūṭī (1993) and Zurqānī (n.d.) argued for its continuity based on early communal practice, while reformist movements later limited it to direct supplication to God. In the Shia corpus, however, the Ahl al-Bayt are viewed as perpetual spiritual mediators whose intercession symbolizes ultimate submission to divine will.

Despite the breadth of the existing literature, several gaps remain. First, much of the earlier discussion has been confined within sectarian boundaries, focusing either on Sunni or Shia reasoning without a

balanced comparative synthesis. Second, classical texts were often analyzed descriptively, leaving insufficient critical engagement with their theological underpinnings. Third, contemporary studies not only are few in abundance but they are mostly tended to emphasize sociological dimensions of tawassul while overlooking its hermeneutic and epistemological foundations within Qur'anic discourse.

The present study seeks to fill these gaps by offering a comprehensive, cross-sectarian analysis that integrates Sunni and Shia perspectives on tawassul through a descriptive-analytical framework. It revisits the primary sources to demonstrate that both traditions, when interpreted within their original contexts, uphold tawassul as a practice grounded in monotheism rather than in deviation from it. This research differs from previous works by systematically juxtaposing Qur'anic exegesis, Prophetic traditions, and theological reflections across schools, thereby uncovering a shared doctrinal core. Furthermore, by re-examining classical authorities in light of modern hermeneutic principles, the study clarifies that tawassul is not merely a devotional act but an expression of humanity's perennial quest for proximity to the Divine. In doing so, it contributes to current inter-sectarian dialogue and provides a conceptual bridge between historical theology and contemporary Islamic thought.

In the context of this research, for analytical and theological discussion, first the concept of tawassul and its use in Quran is discussed. Second, while its categories are discussed, some instances of tawassul by the prophet Adam, tawassul to the Prophet Muhammad and public practices of tawassul through the Prophet are mentioned. In the final parts of the study, the distinction between tawassul to prophets, saints and idol worship as well as the boundary and relationship between tawhid and tawassul are fully explained and discussed.

3. Tawassul and Wasilah in Terminology and Expression

In lexicographical books, the term "tawassul" (seeking means) and "wasilah" (means) driven from the Arabic stem "wasala"¹ has been

¹ An action of taking advantage of a means to seek nearness to somebody or something

presented with various expressions, but all convey nearly the same meaning. In language, "wasilah" (means) refers broadly to anything that brings a person closer to another. "Lisan al-Arab," one of the famous lexicographical works, states: "Wasilah means something by which one draws closer to another."² (Ibn Manzūr, 1994, p.725) Similarly, Ibn Fāris (2001) says: "Wasilah signifies absolute desire or seeking."³ (p.110) In "Mufradat fi Gharib al-Quran," it is mentioned: "Wasilah means drawing near or connecting to something with interest and desire."⁴ (Rāghib, 2001, entry "وَسْلَنْ", p. 524.) Other lexicographers such as Shartūnī (1995) and Fayyūmī (2007) have provided similar definitions of this term.

The Al-Munjid in the Arabic Language, a work by Maalouf (1867–1946 CE), is one of the most renowned and widely used Arabic-to-Arabic dictionaries compiled in the 20th century. It provides a very clear and entirely Sharia-compliant definition of the term "tawassul": "He sought means (tawassala) to Allah through an act or a means (wasilah)"⁵ (Malūf, 1994, p.900).

Moīn (2009) presents the same Arabic meaning for the word [which is also entered with the same spelling in Persian], equating it to seeking help, taking recourse, resorting to someone, or clinging to someone. Tabataba'i (1995) interprets that wasilah is the act of accompanying and seeking closeness, and it may also be used to mean something that facilitates accompaniment and closeness. Then he suggests that the second meaning is more appropriate.

In the Holy Quran, the word wasilah is used rather implicitly, but by referring to narrations and the words of scholars and great figures, we understand its meanings. Imam Ali (peace be upon him), in part of Sermon 110 of Nahj al-Balāgha, says:

The best means by which seekers of nearness to Allah, the Glorified, the Exalted, seek nearness, is the belief in Him and His Prophet, fighting in His cause, for it is the high pinnacle of Islam, and (to believe) in the *kalimatu'l-'ikhlas* (the expression of Divine purification) for it is just nature and the establishment

² «الوسيلة ما يتقرّب به إلى الغير»

³ «الوسيلة الرغبة و الطلب»

⁴ «الوسيلة: التوصّل إلى الشّيء برغبة»

⁵ «وَسَلَّنَ تَوَسَّلَ إلى الله بعمل أو وسيلة»

of prayer for it is (the basis of) community, payment of *zakat* (Islamic tax) for it is a compulsory obligation, fasting for the month of *Ramadan* for it is the shield against chastisement, the performance of *hajj* of the House of Allah (i. e. Ka'bah) and its '*umrah* (other than annual pilgrimage) for these two acts banish poverty and wash away sins, regard for kinship for it increases wealth and length of life, to giving alms secretly for it covers shortcomings, giving alms openly for it protects against a bad death and extending benefits (to people) for it saves from positions of disgrace. (Razi, n.d., p. 249)⁶

According to the above remarks by Imam Ali, the best means by which one can turn to Almighty God are ten things: 1. Affirmation and confession of God's oneness and the prophethood of His Messenger, 2. Struggle (jihad) in the way of God, 3. The word of sincerity ('la ilaha illa Allah' — there is no god but God), 4. Establishing prayer, 5. Giving zakat, 6. Fasting the month of *Ramadan*, 7. Performing *Hajj* and *Umrah* to the House of God, 8. Maintaining kinship ties, 9. Giving charity secretly and openly, and 10. Performing good deeds.

Based on the foregoing sources, it can be inferred that the semantic and theological connotations of *tawassul* exhibit a notable congruence, both signifying the pursuit of proximity to Allah through the adoption of an intermediary, whether manifested as a means or as a virtuous deed.

4. Tawassul in the Quran

The Glorious Quran permits selecting means and turning to them, and indeed recommends it: "O you who believe! Fear God, seek the means of drawing near to Him, and strive in His cause! Perhaps you will succeed."⁸ (5:35) Furthermore, the Noble Quran attributes positive

⁶ «إِنَّ أَفْضَلَ مَا تَوَسَّلُ بِهِ الْمُؤْسِلُونَ إِلَى اللَّهِ سُبْحَانَهُ وَ تَعَالَى: الْإِيمَانُ بِهِ وَ بِرَسُولِهِ، وَ الْجِهَادُ فِي سَبِيلِهِ فَإِنَّهُ ذِرَّةُ الْإِسْلَامِ، وَ كَلْمَةُ الْإِخْلَاصِ فَإِنَّهَا الْفَطْرَةُ، وَ أَقْلَامُ الصَّلَاةِ فَإِنَّهَا الْمُلْهُ، وَ إِبَاتَةُ الرُّكَّانَ فَإِنَّهَا فَرِيَضَةٌ وَاجِةٌ، وَ صَوْمُ شَهْرِ رَمَضَانَ فَإِنَّهُ حُكْمُهُ مِنَ الْعِقَابِ، وَ حَجُّ الْبَيْتِ وَ اعْتِمَادُهُ فَإِنَّهُمَا يَنْفِعُانِ الْفَقَرَ وَ يَرْحَمَانِ الدُّنْبَ، وَ صَلَةُ الرَّحْمَمَ فَإِنَّهَا مُتَرَّأَةٌ فِي الْمَالِ وَ مُنْسَأَةٌ فِي الْأَجْلِ، وَ صَدَقَةُ السَّبِّرِ فَإِنَّهَا تُكَفِّرُ الْخَطِيَّةَ، وَ صَدَقَةُ الْعَلَاءِيَّةِ فَإِنَّهَا تَنْفَعُ مِيَّتَهُ السُّوءِ، وَ صَنَاعَةُ الْمَعْرُوفِ فَإِنَّهَا تَقْيَ مَصَارِعَ الْهَوَانِ». ⁷

⁷ «لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ»
⁸ مائده / ٣٥. «يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِنَّهُمْ أَنفُسُهُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ»

effect to the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) supplication and seeking forgiveness for God's servants, and says: "If, when they had wronged themselves, they had come to you and asked forgiveness of God, and the Messenger had asked forgiveness for them, they would have found God ever-accepting of repentance and Merciful."⁹ (4:64) This noble verse lays the foundation for the belief in intercession and the efficacy of means before God and establishes it. Likewise, according to the Quran, Joseph's (peace be upon him) brothers sought intercession from Jacob (peace be upon him) for the forgiveness of their sin and error, and he accepted their request: "They said: 'O our father! Ask forgiveness for us of our sins; indeed, we have been wrongdoers.' He said: 'I will ask my Lord to forgive you; indeed, He is the Oft-Forgiving, the Most Merciful.'"¹⁰ (12: 97&98) From these verses it follows that tawassul is placing an entity that is highly valued and honored in the sight of God as an intermediary between oneself and God in order to attain nearness to Him. Therefore, the valuable entity to which we turn may sometimes be righteous deeds and sincere worship of God, which serve as powerful means to draw us near to the Lord of the worlds, and at other times a noble person who holds a special rank and respect in the sight of the Almighty God.

5. Categories of Tawassul

Tawassul can be divided into three categories:

1. **Tawassul through righteous deeds:** As narrated by Suyūṭī (1993) in his commentary on the verse "And seek the means of approach to Him"¹¹, Qatadah explained regarding this verse: "One should draw near to the Lord through obedience to Him and deeds that please Him."¹² (p. 280)
2. **Tawassul through the supplication of righteous servants:** As previously mentioned, the Holy Quran recounts the story of the

⁹ نساء / ٦٤. «وَأُنْوَنَّهُمْ إِذْ طَلَمُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ جَاءُوكَ فَاسْتَغْفِرُوا لَهُ وَاسْتَغْفِرُ لَهُمُ الرَّسُولُ لَوْجَدُوا اللَّهَ تَوَابًا رَّجِيمًا»

¹⁰ يوسف / ٩٧ و ٩٨. «قَالُوا يَا أَيُّهَا اسْتَغْفِرُ لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَا إِنَّا كُلُّنَا خَاطِئُونَ قَالَ سَوْفَ اسْتَغْفِرُ لَكُمْ رَبِّي إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّجِيمُ»

¹¹ ماندہ / ٣٥. «...وَابْتَغُوا إِلَيْهِ الْوَسِيلَةَ...»

¹² «عن قتادة في قوله تعالى (وابتغوا إليه الوسيلة) قال: تقربوا إلى الله بطاعته و العمل بما يرضيه»

brothers of Yusuf (Joseph), who said to their father, Yaqub (Jacob): "O our father, ask forgiveness for us from our Lord; indeed, we have been sinners."¹³ (12:97) [Yaqub] replied, "I will ask my Lord for forgiveness for you. Indeed, He is the Forgiving, the Merciful." (12:97) This verse clearly indicates that the sons of Yaqub sought the intercession of their father's supplication and considered it a means for their forgiveness. Prophet Yaqub did not object to their request but instead promised to pray for them.

3. **Tawassul through honorable spiritual figures** who hold a special and revered status before God, as a means to attain divine proximity. This form of Tawassul has been accepted and practiced by the companions of the Prophet since the early days of Islam. Abu Abdullah Al-Bukhari records in his Sahih: "During times of drought, Umar ibn Al-Khattab would seek rain through Abbas ibn Abdul-Muttalib, the uncle of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family), saying, 'O Allah, we used to seek Your mercy through Your Prophet, and You would grant us rain. Now we seek Your mercy through the uncle of Your Prophet, so grant us rain.' And they would be granted rain."¹⁴ (Bukhari, 1981, p. 16). The practice of seeking intercession through the Awliya (friends of God) was so common that early Muslims even referenced the Prophet as their means to God in their poetry. The Arab poet of the Prophet's time, Suwād ibn Qārib Al-Dawsi, composed a poem in honor of the noble Prophet, saying: "I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, and you are a witness over all hidden and unseen. I bear witness that you—O son of the noble and pure—are the closest means

¹³ يوسف / ٩٧ و ٩٨ . « قَالُوا يَا أَبَانَا اسْتَغْفِرْ لَنَا ذُوِّبَنَا إِنَّا لِكُلِّ خَاطِئٍ بِنَّا قَالَ سَوْفَ اسْتَغْفِرُ لَكُمْ رَبِّي إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّجِيمُ »

¹⁴ « أَنَّ عُمَرَ بْنَ الْخَطَّابَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ كَانَ إِذَا قَطَّعُوا اسْتِسْقَى بِالْعَبَاسِ بْنِ عَبْدِ الْمُطَّلِبِ، فَقَالَ: اللَّهُمَّ إِنَّا كُلُّنَا نَتَوَسَّلُ إِلَيْكَ بِنَبِيِّنَا فَقْسِنْتَنَا، وَإِنَّا نَتَوَسَّلُ إِلَيْكَ بِعَمِّ نَبِيِّنَا فَاسْقِنْتَنَا، قَالَ: فَيُسْقِنُونَ »

to God among all the prophets."¹⁵ (IslamWeb, n.d.). At the same time, although the Noble Prophet heard this verse of poetry from him, he never reproached him for such an utterance, nor did he accuse him of associating partners with God (shirk) or of religious innovation (bid'ah). Al-Shafi'i (2014) likewise alludes to this reality in the following couplet: "The family of the Prophet are my means of approaching God, and I hope that, through them, my record of deeds will be placed in my right hand"¹⁶ (p. 50).

Although numerous narrations have been transmitted concerning the permissibility of seeking tawassul through the friends of God, in light of the aforementioned reports, the legitimacy and desirability of tawassul—from the perspective of the Prophet's practice, the method of his Companions, and the teachings of eminent Muslim scholars—becomes clear, obviating the need for further elaboration. On this basis, the untenability of the claim advanced by those who regard tawassul to the elect servants of God as an act of shirk or bid'ah is decisively established.

6. Tawassul by Prophet Adam (peace be upon him)

Juwaynī (1978) writes that Abu Hurairah reported from the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) that he said:

When Allah the Exalted created Adam, the father of mankind, and breathed into him of His spirit, Adam turned to the right side of the Throne and saw five figures in prostration and bowing amidst light. He asked, 'Have You created anyone from clay before me?' Allah replied, 'No, O Adam.' Adam then asked, 'Who are these five figures I see in their forms and appearances?' Allah said, 'These are five of your descendants. Had it not been for them, I would not have created you. They are five whose names I have derived from My own names. Had they not existed, I would not have created Paradise, Hell, the Throne, the

¹⁵ «وَ اشْهَدُ أَنَّ لَا رَبَّ غَيْرَهُ وَ أَنَّكَ مَأْمُونٌ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ غَالِبٍ وَ أَنَّكَ أَدْنَى الْمُرْسَلِينَ وَسِيلَةٌ إِلَىٰ اللَّهِ يَابْنِ الْأَكْرَمِ الْأَطْيَبِ»

¹⁶ «إِنَّ النَّبِيَّ ذُرِّيْعَتِيْ وَهُمْ إِلَيْهِ وَسِيلَتِيْ ارْجُوْهُمْ اعْطِيْ غَدَاءً بِيْدِي الْيَمِينِ صَحِيفَتِي»

Footstool, the heavens, the earth, the angels, or mankind and jinn. I am Al-Mahmud (the Praised), and this is Muhammad. I am Al-Ali (the Exalted), and this is Ali. I am Al-Fatir (the Originator), and this is Fatima. I am Al-Ihsan (the Beneficent), and this is Hasan. I am Al-Muhsin (the Bestower of Good), and this is Husayn. By My might, I swear that no one will come to Me with even a mustard seed's worth of hatred for them in their heart, except that I will cast them into Hell without hesitation. O Adam, these are My chosen ones. Through them, I grant salvation or destruction. So, if you have any need [or request] from Me, seek their intercession.' Then the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) said, 'We are the Ark of Salvation. Whoever boards it will be saved, and whoever turns away will perish.'¹⁷ (pp. 36–37)

This narration not only proves the importance of the tawassul but also the lofty position of the five mentioned people who are known as the People of the Cloak (Ahl al-Kisā')—also known as the Five Holy Figures: The Prophet Muḥammad, his cousin and son-in-law 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, his daughter Fāṭimah al-Zahrā', and his grandsons al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn. They are central to both Sunni and Shia traditions, with particular theological significance in Shia Islam.

According to the Hadith of the Cloak (Hadīth al-Kisā'), reported in both Sunni and Shia sources, the Prophet gathered these four family members under his cloak and invoked divine purification upon them. This event is linked to the Quranic Verse of Purification: "Indeed, Allah intends only to remove defilement from you, O People of the Household, and to purify you completely" (33:33). In Sunni Islam, the

¹⁷ «عن أبي هريرة عن النبي صلى الله عليه و آله و سلم ألم قال: «لما خلق الله تعالى آدم أبا البشر و نفخ فيه من روحه التفت آدم يمنة العرش فإذا في التور خمسة أشباح سجداً و ركعاً. قال آدم: هل خلقت أحداً من طين قبلى؟ قال: لا يا آدم. قال: ففن هؤلاء الخمسة الأشباح الذين أراهم في هيئتي و صورتي؟ قال: هؤلاء خمسة من ولدك لولاهم ما خلقتك، هؤلاء خمسة شفقت لهم خمسة أسماء من أسمائي لولاهم ما خلقت الجنّة و النار، و لا العرش و لا الكرسي، و لا السماء و لا الأرض، و لا الملائكة و لا الإنس و لا الجن، فأنّا المحمود و هذا محمد، و أنا العالى و هذا على، و أنا الفاطر و هذه فاطمة، و أنا الإحسان و هذا الحسن، و أنا المحسن و هذا الحسين، ليلت بعزمي أن لا يأتيني أحد بمنقال ذرة من خردل من بعض أحدهم إلا أدخله نارى و لا أبالي، يا آدم هؤلاء صفوتي بهم أنجيم و بهم أهلگهم، فإذا كان لك إلى حاجة فيهؤلاء توسل. فقال النبي صلى الله عليه و آله و سلم: نحن سفينة النجاة من تعلق بها نجا، و من حاد عنها هلك.».

Ahl al-Kisā' are recognized as the purified household of the Prophet, exemplars of piety. In Shia theology, they are seen as infallible (ma'sūmīn) and divinely appointed leaders, forming the doctrinal basis for the Imamate. Their commemoration, especially al-Ḥusayn's martyrdom at Karbalā', shapes much of Shia ritual, spirituality, and identity (Ayoub, 1978; Ibn al-Hajjāj, 2007; Kulaynī, 1981; Madelung, 1997).

In another narration from Umar ibn al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him), it is reported from the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) that he said:

When Prophet Adam (peace be upon him) committed the sin, he pleaded, "O Allah, I ask You by the right of Muhammad to forgive me." Allah said, "O Adam, how did you know Muhammad when I have not yet created him?" Adam replied, "O Lord, when You created me and breathed into me of Your spirit, I raised my head and saw written on the pillars of the Throne: 'There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.' I realized that the one whose name is paired with Yours must be the most beloved of Your creation." Allah said, "O Adam, you have spoken the truth. He is the most beloved of My creation. You called upon Me by his right, so I have forgiven you. Had it not been for Muhammad, I would not have created you." This hadith has a sound chain of narration.¹⁸ (Hakim al-Nishaburi, 2000, p. 615)

7. Tawassul to the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) in Sunni Sources

In this section, we shall examine a number of significant works authored by prominent Sunnī scholars on the subject of *tawassul* through the Noble Prophet of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the most beloved creation to Allah, and Muslims always express their love and devotion to him in every possible way, seeking

¹⁸ «...عن عمر بن الخطاب قال: قال رسول الله(صلى الله عليه وآله): «لما اقترف آدم الخطيئة قال: يارب أسلك بحق محمد لما غفرت لي، فقال الله: يا آدم وكيف عرفت محمدًا ولم أخلقه، قال: يارب لأنك لما خلقتني بيديك ونفخت فيّ من روحك رفعت رأسى فرأيت على قوام العرش مكتوبًا لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله، فلعلت أنك لم تصنف إلى اسمك إلا أحب الخلق إليك، فقال الله: صدقت يا آدم أنه لأحب الخلق إلى ادعوني بحقه فقد غفرت لك ولو لا محمد ما خلقتك». قال الحكم: «هذا حديث صحيح الأسناد».

closeness to the Divine Essence through this love. Reviewing these writings helps clarify the status of *tawassul* among Muslim scholars and demonstrates that it has been a common practice among Muslims, not to be classified as *shirk*.

- Ibn al-Jawzī (597/1201) composed *al-Wafā fī fadā'il al-Muṣṭafā*, dedicating one chapter to *tawassul* through the Prophet and another to seeking healing at his blessed grave (Ibn al-Jawzī, 1937).
- Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Mūsā b. Nu'mān al-Mazālī al-Maghribī (683/1284) authored a treatise entitled *Miṣbāḥ al-ẓalām fī al-mustaghthīn bikhayr al-anām 'alayhi al-ṣalāt wa-l-salām fī al-yaqāṣa wa-l-manām* ("The Lamp of Darkness Concerning Those Who Seek Aid from the Best of Mankind, peace and blessings be upon him, in Wakefulness and in Dreams") on the subject of *tawassul* to the Prophet (ṣallā Allāh 'alayhi wa-ālih wa-sallam). In this work, the author seeks to demonstrate, through numerous examples of prophetic miracles and mercy toward the community, the theological rationale underlying certain devotional beliefs such as *tawassul*. He also highlights various expressions of love and recourse to the Prophet. The text presents accounts, supported by reliable reports, of historical events attesting to the praiseworthiness of *tawassul* to the Prophet both during his lifetime and after his passing. Owing to the significance of this book and the value of its contents, many later scholars cited it in their own works, including Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sakhāwī in *al-Qawl al-badī'*, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Qastallānī in *al-Mawāhib al-ladunniyya* and *Masālik al-ḥunafā'*, and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī in *Tanwīr al-halak* and *al-Arj bi-l-faraj*.
- Ibn Dāwūd al-Mālikī al-Shādhilī, in *al-Bayān wa-l-ikhtisār*, compiled instances in which scholars and pious individuals sought relief from hardship through *tawassul* to the Prophet (Ibn Dāwūd al-Mālikī al-Shādhilī, n.d.).
- Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (756/1355) analyzed the subject extensively in *Shifā' al-siqām* (Subkī, 1935).

- Sayyid Nūr al-Dīn al-Samhūdī (911/1506), in his renowned *Wafā’ al-wafā’ bi-akhbār dār al-Muṣṭafā’*, discussed the matter and provided numerous supporting reports (Samhūdī, 1908).
- Abū al-‘Abbās al-Qaṣṭallānī (923/1517) addressed the subject in *al-Mawāhib al-ladunniyya* (Qaṣṭallānī, 2008).
- Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Zurqānī (122/739) in his *Sharh al-Mawāhib al-ladunniyya* (Zurqānī, n.d.).
- Khālidī al-Baghdādī (1299/1882) authored *Ṣulh al-ikhwān*, and later a treatise responding to Sayyid Maḥmūd Ālūsī on *tawassul*, published in 1306/1889 (Khālidī al-Baghdādī, 1882, 1889).
- ‘Adawī Ḥamzāwī (1303/1886) treated the subject in *Kanz al-maṭālib* (Hamzāwī, 1886).
- ‘Izzāmī al-Shāfi’ī al-Qaḍā’ī authored *Furqān al-Qur’ān*, published alongside al-Bayhaqī’s *al-Asmā’ wa-l-ṣifāt* (Qaḍā’ī, n.d.).

A study of these works—some of which present the subject with notable clarity, especially *Ṣulh al-ikhwān* and *Furqān al-Qur’ān*—enables us to trace the practice of Muslims in every age concerning *tawassul* to the Noble Messenger. This, in turn, absolves those who practice *tawassul* to the Prophet, the other prophets, and the *awliyā’ Allāh* (friends of God) from the accusation of *shirk*.

Moreover, one must always bear in mind the Qur’ānic command in Sūrat al-Mā’idah (5:35): “O you who believe! Be mindful of God, and seek a means of nearness to Him [through faith, righteous deeds, and the honor of those near to Him], and strive hard in His cause, so that you may prosper.”¹⁹

8. Public Practices of Tawassul Through the Prophet

In his work *Husn al-Tawassul fī Ādāb Ziyārat Afdal al-Rusul* (“The Excellence of Intercession in the Etiquettes of Pilgrimage to the Best of Messengers”), Jamāl al-Dīn ‘Abd Allāh al-Fākihī al-Shāfi’ī (d. 1564 CE/972 AH) outlines ninety-four etiquettes and instructions regarding pilgrimage rights. In the twenty-fifth section, he states that when a pilgrim stands before the Prophet’s grave, he should seek *tawassul* through him, appoint him as an intercessor before God, and engage in

¹⁹ مائده / ٣٥. «يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَابْتَغُوا إِلَيْهِ الْوَسِيلَةَ وَجَاهُوا فِي سَبِيلِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ»

abundant repentance and supplication. The pilgrim is then encouraged to recite the Quranic verse: “*And if, when they wronged themselves, they had come to you, [O Muhammad], and asked forgiveness of Allah, and the Messenger had asked forgiveness for them, they would have found Allah Accepting of repentance and Merciful*”²⁰ (4:64). Following this, the pilgrim addresses the Prophet, saying: “O Messenger of God, I have come to pilgrimage you in repentance from my sins, appointing you as my intercessor before God. O Messenger of God, I am your guest; I ask you to seek forgiveness for me before God and to intercede for me.” In the thirty-first etiquette, the author further instructs that after paying pilgrimage to the Prophet’s grave, it is recommended that the pilgrim proceed daily—especially on Fridays—to pilgrimage the graves of the Imams buried in al-Baqī’.

Qastallānī (d. 1517 CE/923 AH) in *al-Mawāhib al-Ladunniyya*, affirms that it is commendable for the pilgrim at the Prophet’s grave to frequently pray, implore, and seek intercession through him. He explains that such intercession has always been efficacious—prior to the Prophet’s creation, during his earthly life, after his passing, in the *barzakh* (intermediate state), and on the Day of Resurrection (Qastallānī, 2008). Zurqānī (n.d.) in his commentary on *al-Mawāhib*, wherein he stresses that those who deny the validity of *tawassul* are deprived, for God has stripped them of spiritual insight and left them misguided (p.219).²¹ As he notes, the Quran explicitly states: “*And if, when they wronged themselves, they had come to you, [O Muhammad], and asked forgiveness of Allah, and the Messenger had asked forgiveness for them, they would have found Allah Accepting of repentance and Merciful*”²² (4:64).

Likewise, Imām Muḥammad al-‘Abdarī al-Qayrawānī al-Mālikī (d. 1337 CE/737 AH), in *al-Madkhal* explains that when pilgrimaging the graves of the prophets and messengers (peace be upon them), one should set out

²⁰ نساء / ٦٤. «وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ إِذْ ظَلَمُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ جَاءُوكَ فَاسْتَغْفِرُوا اللَّهَ وَ اسْتَغْفِرُ لَهُمُ الرَّسُولُ لَوْجَدُوا اللَّهُ تَوَّاباً رَّجِيماً»

²¹ «... ومن اعتقد خلاف ذلك فهو المحروم الذي طمس الله بصيرته وأضل سريرته، ألم يسمع قوله تعالى: {وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ إِذْ ظَلَمُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ جَاءُوكَ...} ...»

²² نساء / ٦٤. «وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ إِذْ ظَلَمُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ جَاءُوكَ فَاسْتَغْفِرُوا اللَّهَ وَ اسْتَغْفِرُ لَهُمُ الرَّسُولُ لَوْجَدُوا اللَّهُ تَوَّاباً رَّجِيماً»

from afar with sincere intention. Upon arrival, the pilgrim must approach with humility and neediness, focusing inwardly with the heart rather than outwardly with the eyes. At that moment, the pilgrim should glorify God, send blessings upon the prophets, express satisfaction with their companions, and then seek *tawassul* through them to God for the fulfillment of needs and forgiveness of sins. He must remain confident that by their blessing, his petitions will be granted, for they are the open gateways (*abwāb Allāh al-maftūha*), and God has decreed the fulfillment of needs through them. If one cannot visit in person, he should convey greetings from afar and present his needs, for they are generous and do not turn away those who call upon them. As for pilgrimaging the Seal of the Prophets, one should do so repeatedly, for he is the supreme intercessor whose intercession is never rejected. Therefore, whoever seeks *tawassul*, *istighātha* (imploration), or petitions through him will never be refused or disappointed ('Abdārī, 1920, p.257).

Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Halabī (d. 1549 CE/956 AH), in his work *Majma' al-Anhar fī Sharḥ Multaqā al-Abhur* (1998 edition), includes a pilgrimage litany (*ziyāra*) for the Prophet Muḥammad. In this text, he invokes blessings upon the Messenger of God and addresses him directly: "O Messenger of God, I ask you for the great intercession, and through *tawassul* with you, I seek nearness to my Lord so that I may die as a Muslim and be resurrected among God's righteous servants" (Halabī, 1998). Similarly, 'Adawī Hamzāwī (d. 1886 CE/1303 AH), in *Kanz al-Maṭālib* (p. 216), instructs the pilgrim concerning the etiquettes of pilgrimage. He advises that, while renewing repentance, the best words to utter in the Blessed tomb of the Prophet are the recitation of the Quranic verse: "وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ لَذِكْرُهُمْ جَانِبُكَ ... " (4:64). The pilgrim should then address the Messenger of God, saying: "We are your visitors; for the right you hold over us and for the sake of blessing and intercession, we have come to pilgrimage you. For our sins are many, and our hearts have grown darkened" (Hamzāwī, 1886).

According to Amīnī (1987), a number of Quran memorizers (*ḥuffāz*) and Sunni scholars have elaborated on the concept of *tawassul*, affirming that seeking intercession through the Prophet Muḥammad has always been permissible—before his creation, during his earthly life,

after his passing, in the barzakh (intermediate state/ realm), and after the commencement of the Day of Resurrection. They classify tawassul into three categories. The first form refers to supplicating to God Almighty by invoking the Prophet's rank and blessing; this, they unanimously affirm, is permissible. The second form consists of requesting the Prophet's prayer on behalf of the believer, which all likewise consider permissible. The third form involves directly asking something of the Prophet himself, in the belief that he can serve as a means and intercede before God in every state. This third type, however, ultimately reduces to the second form, as both share the same essential meaning despite differences in wording (p. 145).

Although an extensive corpus of works has been devoted to the subject of *tawassul*, the present study cites only a select number of representative examples to illustrate the discussion. In this regard, one can take advantages of the five following books to grasp more knowledge of the subject:

1. *Shawāhid al-ḥaqqa fī al-istighātha bi-Sayyid al-khalq*²³ by Shaykh Yūsuf ibn Ismā‘il al-Nabahānī
2. *Al-Fajr al-ṣādiq fī al-radd ‘alā munkirī al-tawassul wa-al-karāmāt wa-al-khawāriq*²⁴ by Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī
3. *Al-Baṣā’ir limunkirī al-tawassul bi-ahl al-qubūr*²⁵ by Ḥamdullāh Dājū’ī
4. *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāgha*²⁶ by Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd
5. *Usd al-ghābah fī ma ‘rifat al-ṣahābah*²⁷ by Ibn Athīr

9. The Distinction Between Tawassul to Prophets and Saints and Idol Worship

The practice of *tawassul* fundamentally differs from the idolatrous practices of polytheists. Idol worshippers claimed to draw near to their God, yet in reality, they directed acts of worship and devotion toward angels, jinn, or human beings whom they regarded as intermediaries

²³ شواهد الحق في توسُّل بسيد الخلق

²⁴ الفجر الصادق في الرد على منكري التوسُّل والكرامات والخوارق

²⁵ البصائر، لمنكري التوسُّل باهل المقابر

²⁶ شرح نهج البلاغة

²⁷ أسد الغابة في معرفة الصحابة

[their deities]. In doing so, they abandoned the worship of God altogether, neither showing hope in Him nor fearing Him. Their entire reliance was on these intermediaries, to whom they directed both reverence and supplication. Consequently, instead of genuinely turning to God, they worshipped the intermediaries themselves, placing their hope in the mercy of these beings and fearing their wrath. For this reason, they constructed idols and statues—believed to represent angels, jinn, or revered humans—and devoted themselves to these images as objects of worship. Their offerings and sacrifices were presented not to God, but to these false representations, in an effort to achieve closeness to the intermediaries. In other word, although polytheists outwardly claimed that their intention was to seek proximity to God through His creation, in practice they ascribed independent power to these intermediaries, directing to them the very acts of worship that belong exclusively to God. As a result, idols and imagined deities were elevated to the status of partners with God in both Lordship and worship (Tabātabā'ī, 1995, pp. 179–180).

In this regard, later theologians and jurists across the Islamic tradition have clarified the difference between legitimate tawassul and the idolatrous practices associated with shirk. For instance, al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE), while emphasizing divine unity, recognized the permissibility of seeking intercession through the Prophets and the righteous, provided that the ultimate source of efficacy is attributed to God alone. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE), despite his reservations about certain popular practices, also distinguished between supplicating to God while mentioning the status of His servants, which he deemed permissible, and directing worship or reliance toward created beings, which he considered polytheism. Al-Suyūtī (d. 1505 CE) explicitly endorsed the validity of *tawassul* to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), citing numerous Prophetic traditions and historical precedents. Similarly, within the Shi'i tradition, Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640 CE) and other philosophers and jurists underscored that intercession and mediation by the Imams and saints operate only by divine will, and thus reinforce rather than compromise the principle of *tawhīd* (Ghazālī, n.d.; Ibn Taymiyya, 2001 & 2002; Mullā Ṣadrā, 1998; Suyūtī, n.d.).

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate a wide scholarly consensus that properly understood tawassul is distinct from idolatry, as it functions within the theological framework of God's absolute sovereignty.

10. The Boundary and Relationship Between Tawhid and Tawassul

According to Mutahhari (1973), an important point regarding worship-based tawhid is that in *tawassul* (seeking mediation) and *istishfā'* (seeking intercession) with God's chosen servants, one must first ascertain that *tawassul* is sought through those whom God Himself has designated as a means. As the Quran states: "*O you who have believed, fear Allah and seek the means [of nearness] to Him ...*" (5:35).

In general, appealing to means (*asbāb*) and utilizing causes (*tasabbus*) does not contradict tawhid, since it is God who has created the causes, who has made them effective, and who has commanded human beings to employ them. Such practice is, in fact, an affirmation of monotheism, not polytheism. In this respect, there is no difference between material and spiritual causes, external and internal causes, or worldly and otherworldly causes. The only distinction is that material causes can be discerned through experience and empirical observation, while spiritual causes must be discovered through religion—namely, through revelation, scripture, and tradition.

Second, when a person engages in *tawassul* or *istishfā'*, the focus must remain on God, and only through Him is the intercessor approached. Genuine intercession is that in which the *mashfū'* *indahu* (the One before whom intercession is sought) has Himself authorized and permitted the intercessor (*shafī'*) to act. Intercession, therefore, is valid only because God wills it and grants permission. In contrast, 'false intercession' arises when one's primary attention is fixed upon the intercessor, assuming that the intercessor's independent influence could sway the One with whom intercession is sought. In this erroneous form, the sinner's entire reliance is placed upon the intercessor's personal power or authority rather than upon God's will, and this constitutes shirk in worship (Mutahhari, 1973, pp. 314–315).

Thus, if the Quran or the prophetic traditions, which articulate divine commandments, designate a non-material or spiritual cause as a

legitimate means, then *tawassul* through it is valid and lawful. From this analysis, two conditions emerge under which recourse to spiritual causes and means is permissible:

1. The cause must be explicitly designated in the Quran or Sunnah as a means to attain worldly or otherworldly objectives.
2. The cause must never be regarded as independently efficacious, but only as effective by God's permission and will (Subḥānī, n.d., p. 280; Mutahhari, 1973, p. 264).

Evidently, Mutahhari's perspective aligns closely with several Sunni scholars who have also emphasized that *tawassul* is valid when understood as a means of approaching God rather than as an act of attributing independent power to intermediaries. For instance, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī (1445–1505 CE) argued that the Prophet's intercession operates by divine permission and that seeking his mediation is a legitimate practice rooted in revelation (Suyūtī, n.d.). Similarly, Qastallānī (1448–1517 CE), in his *al-Mawāhib al-ladunniyya*, stressed that supplication at the Prophet's grave is permissible since the Prophet's capacity to intercede remains effective before and after his death (Qastallānī, 2008). In both cases, as with Mutahhari, the central theological principle is that *tawassul* reinforces rather than contradicts monotheism, since it acknowledges God as the sole source of power and efficacy, while recognizing intermediaries only as divinely sanctioned means.

This comparative perspective demonstrates that, across both Sunni and Shi'i traditions, *tawassul* has been consistently upheld as a practice deeply rooted in monotheistic belief—provided it remains within the bounds of divine authorization and does not attribute independent power to the intermediaries. On the basis of the present study's examination of the theological nature and legitimacy of *tawassul* in the Qur'an and other Islamic sources, it may be concluded that a proper understanding of *tawassul* affirms, rather than compromises, the principle of divine unity (*tawhid*).

11. Conclusion

This study has sought to elucidate the concept of *tawassul*, its diverse forms, and its significance as reflected in the Qur'an and broader

Islamic tradition. The analysis underscored that tawassul—whether practiced by prophets, saints, or the faithful in relation to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him and his family), his household, and other divinely guided figures—constitutes an enduring religious practice traceable to the time of Adam. A critical examination of Qur’ānic verses, prophetic traditions, and classical Islamic works demonstrates that a clear delineation of the relationship between tawḥīd (divine unity) and tawassul dispels the common charge that the latter entails polytheism. The theological reasoning affirms that when ultimate power is recognized as belonging exclusively to God, and when His chosen servants are understood to intercede only by His will and command, then appealing to them is not an act of shirk (polytheism) but rather an affirmation of monotheism. This interpretation accords with the Qur’ān itself: “Who is it that can intercede with Him except by His permission?”²⁸ (Q 2:255). Moreover, many exegetes emphasize that the essence of intercession ultimately signifies an appeal to God’s own Most Beautiful Names—His mercy, forgiveness, and concealment of faults—such that all forms of tawassul ultimately return to His pure essence.

The findings of this study suggest that a deeper understanding of tawassul may foster greater unity among Muslims by highlighting the shared theological foundations across different schools of thought, rather than accentuating their divergences. Nonetheless, as with any academic inquiry, certain limitations remain. Chief among these is the vastness of the textual corpus on tawassul, which could not be exhaustively treated within the scope of a single article. Future research would therefore benefit from more specialized and detailed analyses, engaging both classical and contemporary sources, to further illuminate this significant aspect of Islamic theology.

²⁸ بقره / ٢٥٥ . » ... مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَشْفَعُ عِنْدَهُ إِلَّا بِأَنْهِ ...

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