Introduction

The term used for supplication in Arabic is *’ad‘iya* (sing. *du‘ā’*). The Quran elucidates the importance of supplicating, remembering, and relying on God for help and assistance in many instances. For example, in Quran 2:186 God conveys to the Prophet, "And when My servants ask you, concerning Me - indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me. So let them respond to Me and believe in Me that they may be guided." Elsewhere, Quran 40:60 expresses that, "And your Lord says, "Call upon Me; I will respond to you..." The importance of supplication is also emphasised in the reported tradition (*sunna*) of the Prophet and his immaculate progeny. For instance, there are many reports in which the Prophet categorically asserts that supplication is one of the greatest acts of worship, and devotion to God is like a weapon that believers possess to manifest their desires. [1] In addition to the Quran and *sunna*, the human faculties of reason and intuition also recognise the significance of supplication, and acknowledge that there are numerous benefits of praying and pleading humbly to God by opening our hearts and confessing our innermost desires to Him.

Individuals can express their innermost desires and invoke God for help and assistance by supplicating to Him in their own unique words and style, or in the words and style of Prophets, Imams, and other saints and sages. Undeniably, one of the finest ways of communicating with God is in the words, style, teachings, and methods of individuals who we believe have attained His proximity and at times received praise from God. Shiite Muslims have a large and rich corpus of supplications and narrations that are attributed to individuals they consider as *ma‘ṣūm* (i.e., the impeccable Prophet and his progeny). However, the content of some of these narrations and supplications have been criticised for seemingly appearing to contradict the principle of monotheism that is normally propounded by orthodox Muslim theologians, thereby contradicting the notion of God-centricity (*tawhid*), which all Muslims (whether Shiites or Sunnis) accept as the most fundamental article of Islamic faith.

As such, although the acceptance of a large corpus of supplications attributed to the *ma‘ṣūm* is highly desirable, it is essential to decipher what is actually from the *ma‘ṣūm* and what is not. This is important due to three reasons; firstly, we know that the *ma‘ṣūm* can never contradict the principle of monotheism (or other apparent and categorical Qur’anic injunctions). Secondly, we know that since its inception, Shiite Islam has had many intra-schisms, and members of some Shiite groups have held extreme and exaggerated beliefs that have been falsely attributed to the *ma‘ṣūm*[2] and found their way into Shiite *hadith* collections that contain narrations and supplications of

the *maʿṣūm*.[3] Thirdly, if the content of a supplication is erroneous, and thereby is falsely attributed to the *maʿṣūm,* then its impact would be limited (if not detrimental) upon the invoker and his/her ability to manifest God's aid and assistance.

Considering the importance of this topic, this paper first presents how orthodox Shiite jurists-cum-theologians approach narrations and supplications that are attributed to the *maʿṣūm*. It then explains their importance from an existential perspective and clarifies how the content and practice of supplications attributed to the *maʿṣūm* are verified using this approach.

The Orthodox Approach

Orthodox Shiite scholars accept the *maʿṣūm* as being divinely appointed representatives of God who can never intentionally or unintentionally misguide their followers. Accordingly, when it comes to establishing their reported traditions that convey important obligatory (*wājib*) and/or prohibited (*ḥarām*) Sharia precepts (or *aḥkām*), scholars heavily emphasise upon stringent methods of authentication.[4] This is because they maintain that by enacting an obligatory Sharia precept, or by *not* enacting a prohibited Sharia precept, a Muslim believer benefits from being rewarded, whereas by enacting a prohibited Sharia precept or *not* enacting an obligatory Sharia precept, a believer is held accountable and may be subjected to chastisement in the hereafter.[5] Due to the consequential impact of obligations and prohibitions, traditional scholars insist that traditions of the *maʿṣūm* that convey obligations and prohibitions can only be taken recourse to if they are reported via narrations that have unbroken chains of transmission that trace back to the *maʿṣūm* and the reliability of each narrator in the chain can be independently verified.

Although this stringent method of analysis allows scholars to assess whether reports that indicate obligations and prohibitions are from the *maʿṣūm* or not, this method cannot be applied when it comes to analysing the authenticity of supplications that are attributed to the *maʿṣūm*. The reason for this is because a large corpus of supplications (and other devotional narrations that are commonly attributed to the *maʿṣūm*) are reported with either weak or no chains of transmission. This thus leaves us with the predicament of either 1) dropping all narrations and supplications that do not have a verifiable chain of transmission, or 2) accepting all of them without any further analysis. Indeed, the problem with choosing the first option is that it results in the loss of numerous eloquent and rich supplications that

are attributed to the *maʿṣūm*, whereas choosing the second option results in the acceptance of supplications that may be falsely attributed to the *maʿṣūm* and as such their practice may have a negative or detrimental impact upon invokers.

In response to this challenge, Shiite scholars have historically argued for the principle of leniency (also known as *al-tasāmuḥ fī adila al-sunan*).[6] In accordance with this principle, narrations (or supplications) attributed to the *maʿṣūm* whose chains of transmission are weak (as in they include some narrators that are unknown or are known to lack reliability) can be relied upon so long as these narrations concern acts that are rewarding (or bring about *thawāb*). By applying this principle, its proponents classify all rewarding acts (or supplications) as being recommended (*mustaḥabb*) by the Sharia without any further extensive scrutiny. They base this principle on a set of traditions, such as the following report from Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 765):

"Whatever [narration] reaches someone of reward (*thawāb*) of something good and he [or she] acts by it, then he [or she] shall get that reward even if the Prophet never said that."[7]

Contrastingly, other prominent Shiite scholars (including Ayatollah Abū Qāsim al-Khūʾī (d. 1992) and Ayatollah Ali al-Ḥusaynī al-Sīstānī) do not consider the principle of leniency as a valid means for classifying a weak narration (or supplication) as a recommended act of Sharia.[8] For instance, Khūʾī elaborates that the language used in the above-mentioned sets of reports is not strong enough to establish that an act - even if it is spiritually rewarding – may be classified as being recommended by Sharia.[9] However, this does not mean that the likes of Khūʾī and Sīstānī deny that following and acting in accordance with such narrations (or supplications) should be avoided, rather they argue that believers may follow them and thus enact the rewarding acts they indicate upon with the "hope of attaining the desired reward" (*rajāʾ al-maṭlūbiyya*).

In essence, Shiite scholars - whether they advocate the principle of leniency or not – accept a wide range of narrations and supplications that are attributed to the *maʿṣūm* without much scrutiny. Saying this, they uphold a key standard, which is that if narrations or supplications contradict the apparent indication of the Quran and/or other traditions of the *maʿṣūm* that are deemed authentic (insofar as they have verifiable chains of transmissions), then they must be rejected.[10] As such, there are numerous instances where orthodox Shiite scholars have rejected certain narrations and supplications despite them upholding the principle of leniency. For example, Ayatollah Makārim Shīrāzī has published a book of supplications entitled *Mafātīḥ-I Nuwīn* which he describes as a modern

version of *Mafātīḥ al-Jinān* that was originally complied in the twentieth century by Shaykh Abbas al-Qummī (d. 1940). In the preface of *Mafātīḥ-I Nuwīn*, Shīrāzī asserts that his purpose behind publishing a new *Mafātīḥ* (or a new compilation of supplications) was to remove some content over which there has been disagreement.[11]

The Existential Approach

The existential approach is found upon the fundamental premise that everything that exists (including human beings) is in a perpetual and fluctuating state of growth. As existence experiences growth, it becomes more self-aware and conscious of that which it subsists through and thus unravels a deep and strong connection with God.[12] The existential approach deems that invoking God through supplicating to Him is very important, as each time an invoker supplicates to God (whether using their own method or the method of others) they self-reflect,[13] and their self-reflection allows them to become self-aware and conscious of their existence. Within the existential approach, narrations and supplications of Prophets, Imams, and other saints and sages are acknowledged as catalysts for growth. Invoking God by following the words, style, and methods of spiritual individuals who have attained higher states of consciousness and a deep connection with God, impacts our own levels of self-awareness and the relationship we have with God. There is no doubt that the supplications of the Prophet and Imams (together with a plurality of other saints and sages) allowed them to manifest their innermost desires, and they could invoke God for anything they wanted. Their supplications are indeed very powerful, and conscientiously repeating them can undeniably assist believers to manifest their desires by invoking God's help and assistance in all matters relating to worldly and spiritual life.

As the existential approach upholds that supplications can be accepted from anyone who has a profound connection with God, it makes a distinction between two types of supplications: 1) supplications that are attributed to the Prophet and Imams and have a chain of transmission, and 2) supplications that are attributed to the Prophet, Imams, and other saints and sages but do not have a chain of transmission. On the basis of the abovementioned set of narrations (for instance the report from Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq),[14] the existential approach rules that if a supplication is attributed to the *maʿṣūm* and has a chain of transmission that leads back to them, then it can be classified as being recommended (*mustaḥabb*) by the Sharia. On the other hand, if a supplication does not have a chain of transmission (or has a weak chain of transmission that leads back to the *maʿṣūm),* then whilst it would be farfetched to classify it as being recommended by the Sharia, it can still be taken recourse to or recited with the intention of it

being efficacious. Such a supplication can thus be classified as being in the state of neutrality and therefore permitted (*mubāḥ*) by the Sharia.[15]

For any supplication to be effective, it is important that the content of the supplication is understood by the invoker. Many times, people read and recite supplications attributed to the *maʿṣūm* without knowing or understanding their content. In *Nuqoosh-e-Ismat: Life Sketches of the Fourteen Infallibles*, Allamah Sayyid Haider Jawadi (d. 2000) discusses the importance of supplications in accordance with the traditions of the *maʿṣūm* and extensively enlists the method they stipulate in how an invoker can manifest their innermost desires and attain God's help and assistance in the most efficient manner.[16] Interestingly, it is found that there are many parallels between what is reportedly prescribed by the *maʿṣūm,* and modern techniques of manifestation that are recommended by present-day psychologists and spiritualists.[17] Anyhow, the single most important criterion that all advocates (from the *maʿṣūm* to modern psychologists and spiritualists) seem to accept is that when an invoker supplicates, they must be present and aware of what they are supplicating. In addition to this criterion, the existential approach proscribes the following essential criteria and conditions that an invoker must have an awareness of for their supplications to have efficacy:

The Awareness of God-Centricity

It is vital that supplications are God-centred or fall within the bounds of monotheism (*tawhid*). Being God-centred whilst supplicating is not only emphasised in the Quran (for example, Quran 2:186 and 40:60) but also in the traditions (*sunna*) of the *maʿṣūm* (which come with strong chains of transmissions). We find that in an overwhelmingly large corpus of supplications attributed to the *maʿṣūm*, their object of invocation has always been God. Neither the Prophet nor the Imams have directed their invocations to anyone other than God for help and assistance. However, there are certain supplications found in Shiite literature where the Imams are apparently directing their invocation to other than God. For instance, a caption from *duʿāʾ al-faraj* mentions:

"O Muhammad! Oh Ali! Oh Ali Oh Muhammad, support me for you both do support me, and save me for you both do save. Oh my master! O patron of the age (Sahib al-Zaman)! [I beseech you for] relief! relief! relief! Come to my aid! come to my aid! come to aid!"[18]

In this caption, the invoker is supplicating to Prophet Muhammad, Imam Ali, and Imam Mahdi for aid and assistance rather than to God. As this supplication is not supported with a verifiable chain of transmission, and its apparent indication is in sharp contrast with the notion of God-centricity that is profoundly displayed within the Quran

and tradition of the *maʿṣūm*, it is difficult to claim that it is recommended to recite by the Sharia. Moreover, reciting this supplication may even be detrimental for the invoker.

The Awareness of not Contradicting the Quran

A condition that is given in the traditions of the *maʿṣūm,* and is also agreed upon by all Muslim scholars (both Shiites and Sunnis), is to reject and refrain from acting in accordance with a reported narration (or supplication) that contradicts the apparent indication of the Quran. This is because all Muslims (including the Prophet and subsequent Imams) accept that the Quran is the word of God and there is no doubt with regards to its transmission. Nonetheless, there are certain supplications narrated in Shiite literature whose apparent indication contradicts the apparent indication of the Quran. For instance, a caption from *duʿāʾ al-nudba* mentions:

"…[God] entrusted with him [i.e., the Prophet] the knowledge of whatever passed and whatever shall come to pass up to the extinction of Your creatures."[19]

The apparent indication of this caption is in sharp contrast with the apparent verse of the Quran wherein God instructs the Prophet to mention:

"Say, I hold not for myself [the power of] benefit or harm, except what Allah has willed. And if I knew the unseen, I could have acquired much wealth, and no harm would have touched me. I am not except a warner and a bringer of good tidings to a people who believe."[20]

Therefore, the apparent indication of the supplication (which has no verifiable chain of transmission) indicates that God has given the Prophet knowledge of everything, whilst the apparent indication of the verse of the Quran (whose chain of transmission is established with certainty) says that God has not given the Prophet knowledge of everything.

The Awareness of Contextual Elements

The invoker must be aware that the *maʿṣūm* had recited supplications and invoked God in their own words and in a particular context, and as such s/he must be mindful that all supplications have both universal and contextual elements to them. Universal elements of a supplication transcend all contextual boundaries and are thus applicable to every invoker irrespective of the time and place in which they exist. On the other hand, the contextual elements of a supplication may only transcend the original context in which it was revealed if another context shares similarities with it.

For the invoker to know the contextual elements of a supplication, s/he must be aware of the content of the supplication **and** the historical background in which the supplication originated. An example of the universal and contextual elements found in supplications is clearly illustrated in some captions of *duʿāʾ al-iftitaḥ*. Whilst the first portion of the supplication is without doubt universally applicable across all different contexts, some captions from the latter part of the supplication are highly contextual. For instance, a caption from the supplication mentions:

"O Allah, we complain to You about the departure of our Prophet, Your blessings be on him and his Household, the absence of our leader [i.e., the Twelfth Imam], the big number of our enemies, the few number of us."[21]

This supplication was revealed in the context of the minor occultation by one of the representatives of the Twelfth Imam. During this time, the Shiites had many antagonists (from within Shiism itself and outside it).[22] Although in the present day, individual Shiite invokers residing in certain regions may feel they have enemies and thus this supplication may still be applicable and resonate with them by providing them with the necessary motivation, in many other regions of the world individual Shiite invokers do not have enemies, and thus for them such captions of this supplication are not applicable or do not resonate, and may in fact evoke feelings of pessimism and an unwarranted negative outlook to life.

An awareness of the contextual elements of supplications is also important because for a supplication to be effective, it must be understood and read with full commitment. Another example of a contextual element is found in the daily supplication that is recommended to be recited in the Islamic month of Rajab. In a caption of this supplication, Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq pleads to God by saying, "Save my grey hairs of the beard from the fire (of Hell)."[23] Although this supplication has a verifiable chain of transmission and thus its recitation may be classified as being recommended by the Sharia, the apparent meaning of this caption may only be effective for men who have grey beards. Please note that this does not mean that women and younger men should stop reading this supplication (and other supplications that consist of contextual elements) altogether, but rather they have the option of either 1) not reading a specific caption of the supplication, or 2) individually interpreting the specific caption in an allegorical or an appropriate metaphorical manner to indicate another (or deeper) meaning.

Awareness of Supplicating in Individual and Communal Capacities

All human beings are in a perpetual state of growth and their level of growth or consciousness is determined by the efforts they undertake in self-reflecting and becoming self-aware (or conscious of their true

existence) coupled undeniably with the mercy of God.[24] As such, it can be said that different human beings have different levels of relationship with God based on their individual understanding of His divinity.[25] This implies that different individuals may be able to interpret supplications (including all of the above mentioned captions of supplications) in line with the relationship that they possess with their Lord.

Accordingly, some may choose to interpret or understand the supplications of the *maʿṣūm* in subjective allegorical or metaphorical manners, whereby for them – in their individual capacity – these supplications (or captions therein) do not contradict the principles of God-centricity, the apparent indication of the Quran, and transcend the context in which they were originally revealed or recited. For instance, it is possible for an individual to interpret and understand the abovementioned supplication (and other similar supplications) within the framework of pantheism/panentheism, or by using Ibn Arabi's Sufism, or Mulla Sadra's theosophy etc.[26] However, since knowledge of such ontological and mystical frameworks is not known by everyone and neither is it widely accepted by the majority of Muslims (whether they may be Shia or Sunni), it can be said that it is inappropriate to recite individually (or subjectively) understood supplications in communal capacities. For example, if in a community of a hundred people, five people understand a particular supplication in an allegorical manner, then it would be inappropriate for them to recite that supplication in a communal setting, as it would not resonate with or be efficacious for the other ninety-five people. In fact, it may even be detrimental for them as it can lead to confusion in their understanding of God-centricity (*tawhid*) and apparent Quranic injunctions.

In essence, the existential approach therefore advocates that all individuals should 1) understand the content and context of supplications, and 2) if the apparent meaning of a supplication (or captions within) contradicts God-centricity or the apparent meaning of the Quran, then it must be discarded unless an individual can robustly justify its practice for themselves.

Conclusion

This article highlights two approaches that are, and can be, taken to accept a large corpus of supplications attributed to the *maʿṣūm*. The traditional approach taken by orthodox Shiite jurists-cum-theologians advocates that supplications attributed to the *maʿṣūm*, which have weak chains of transmission, can be accepted. Although traditional scholars agree on the practice of supplications attributed to the *maʿṣūm*, they do

not always agree on whether one can be classified as being recommended (*mustaḥabb*) by the Sharia.

The existential approach advocates that if a supplication has a verifiable chain of transmission that leads to the *maʿṣūm* then its practice can be classified as being recommended by the Sharia. Meanwhile, if it is not supported with a chain of transmission, or is supported with a weak chain of transmission, then its practice cannot be classified as being Sharia-recommended, rather it can be practiced with the intention of it being efficacious and thus be classified as being permissible (*mubāḥ*) by the Sharia. In addition, the existential approach insists that since the supplications conveyed by the Prophet, Imams, and other saints and sages originated in a context and are infused with their individual styles and methods of communication with God, to be efficacious in today's context the supplications must resonate with and be holistically understood and justifiable by an invoker in his/her individual capacity, and by invokers in their communal capacity.

References

[1] Muḥammad b. Yaʿqūb al-Kulaynī, *Kitāb al-Kāfī*, (Tehran: Dār al-Kutūb al-Islāmiyya,1986) 2:468.

[2] See Hossein Modarressi, *Crises and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shiʿite Islam: Abū Jaʿfar ibn Qiba al-Rāzī and his contribution to Imāmite Shīʿite thought*, (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993) 19-51; Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shiʿi Islam: the history and doctrines of Twelver Shiʿism*, (NewHaven: Yale University Press, 1985) 61-71.

[3] See Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, 110 vols. (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-wafā,1983) 1:26-79.

[4] Details on these methods can be found in the seminarian study of *Uṣūl al-fiqh* (legal theory). For instance, see Muḥammad Riḍā Muẓaffar, *Uṣūl al-fiqh*, 2 vols.(Qum: Būstān-i Kitāb, 1995) 1:426-428; Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr, *Durūs fī ʿilmal-Uṣūl*, 2 vols. (Qum: Muʾassasat al-Nashar al-Islāmī, 1995) 1:108.

[5] Ṣadr, *Durūs,* 1:187; Muẓaffar, *Uṣūl,* 1:401.

[6] Murtaḍaal-Anṣārī, *Farāid al-Uṣūl,* 4 vols. (Qum, Majmaʿ al-fikr al-Islamī,1998) 2:153; Zayn al-Dīn al-ʿĀmūlī, *Sharḥ al-Bidāya fī ʿilm al-Dirāya* (Qum: Manshūrāt ḍiyāʾ al-fayrūz ābādī, 2016) 30-31.

[7] See Kulaynī,*al-Kāfī*, 2:87.

[8] Muhammad al Bahsūdī & Abū Qāsim al-Khūʾī, *Mawsūʿat al-Imam al Khūʾī: Miṣbāḥ al-Uṣūl*, 50 vols. (Qum: Muʾassasat al-Khūʾī al-Islamī, 2009) 47:369; ʿAlī al-Ḥusaynīal-Sīstānī, *Minhāj al-Ṣāliḥīn*, 3vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Muarrikh al-ʿarabī, 2013) 1:15.

[9] Khūʾī, *Mawsūʿat,* 47:370.

[10] For instance, see Ḥusayn Nūrī Ṭabrisī, *Mustadrak al-Wasāʾil wa Mustanbaṭal-Masāʾil*, 35 vols. (Beirut: Muʾassasat Āl al-Bayt, 1987) 17:304.

[11] See Makārim Shīrāzī, *Kullīyāt Mafātīḥ al-Nuwīn*, (Qum: Madrassa Imam Ali, 2008) 16.

[12] See Arif Abdul Hussain, *Islam And God-Centricity: Reassessing Fundamental Theological Assumptions*, (Birmingham: Sajjadiyya Press, 2018).

[13] For instance, the Sixth Imam has reportedly narrated that "Observe the courtesy of supplication. Consider the One on whom you call, how you call on Him and why you call; affirm the immensity and magnificence of Allah. Look with your heart at how He knows what is in your conscience, how He sees your secret being and whatever has occurred and will occur in it, both true and false." See Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, *Miṣbāḥ al-Sharia*, (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Aʾlamiy, 1986) 132.

[14] "Whatever[narration] reaches someone of reward (*thawāb*)of something good and he [or she] acts by it, then he [or she] shallget that reward even if the Prophet never said that." See Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, 2:87.

[15] According to orthodox Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), every humanaction is accompanied by a Sharia precept. Human acts are thus classified aseither being obligatory (*wājib*), prohibited (*ḥarām*), recommended (*mustaḥabb*),or abhorred (*makrūh*) by Sharia. If an act cannot be classified (or proven) to belong to any of these categories, then it is classified as being in thestate of neutrality and hence is simply deemed as being permissible (*mubāḥ*) by Sharia. For instance, due to unavailability of evidence to show otherwise, theact of drinking water (with all things being equal) is classified under thecategory of being permissible.

[16] See Allamah Sayyid Zeeshan Haider Jawadi, *Nuqoosh-e-Ismat: Life Sketches of the Fourteen Infallible,* (Mumbai: Islamic Mobility, 2016), 473-481.

[17] Although such parallels require a fuller study, for further reading please see Joe Dispenza, *Becoming Supernatural: How Common People are Doing the Uncommon* (New York: Hay House, 2017); for a summary see Kimberly Zapata, *How to Manifest Anything you Want or Desire*, [Accessed 3 June 2021].

[18] Dua Faraj, http://www.duas.org/mobile/dua-faraj.html, [Accessed 3 June 2021].

[19] Dua Nudba, https://www.duas.org/mobile/dua-nudba.html, [Accessed 3 June 2021].

[20] See Quran 7:188, 46:9 & 6:50.

[21] Dua Iftitah, https://www.duas.org/mobile/ramadan-dua-night-iftitah.html,[Accessed 3 June 2021].

[22] See Momen, *An Introduction to Shiʿi Islam*, 71-74.

[23] Rajab Dua, http://www.duas.org/rajab3.htm, [Accessed 3 June 2021].

[24] Based on Hadith Qudsi in which Allah says "Take one step towards me, I will take ten steps towards you. Walk towards me, I will run towards you."

[25]This is supported by the following narration from Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq "Worship is of three kinds: some people worship Allah, because they fearHim – so it is the worship of slaves; and a group worships Allah, Blessed and High is He, to seek reward – so it is the worship of hirelings; and a group worships Allah, Mighty and Great is He,because of (His) love – and this is the worship of the free, and it is the most excellent worship." See Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, 67:236. Moreover, this can also be supported by the narration of the Prophet that mentions "if Abū Dharr knew what is in the heart of Salmān, he would kill him." There is no denying that both Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī and Salmān al-Fārsī were very close, loyal, andMuslim companions of the Prophet. However, despite this they both understood God in very different manners. See ibid, 22:343.

[26] For more information see Qāsim Kakaʾi, *The Theory of the Unity of Being and its Demonstrability in Mullā Sadrā and Ibn ʿArabī*, [Accessed 3 June 2021].