

Tawassul, Istighātha, and Shafā‘a in Twelver Shī‘ī Islam: A Qur’ānic, *Ḥadīth*, and Historical Analysis of Their Compatibility with *Tawḥīd*

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Abstract

This article investigates the theological validity of three devotional practices—*tawassul*, *istighātha*, and *shafā‘a*—through which believers seek divine favour via intermediaries. Focusing on their role within Twelver Shī‘ī Islam, it explores ongoing debates about their permissibility and compatibility with the doctrine of Islamic monotheism (*tawḥīd*). The study contextualises their evolution from pre-Islamic Arabia, where polytheistic intermediary practices were reoriented under Islam to affirm divine sovereignty, and traces their continuity through early Islamic, post-Prophetic and contemporary periods. By examining key Qur’ānic verses and *ḥadīth* from both Shī‘ī and Sunnī sources, the study establishes that intermediaries operate solely under God’s permission, negating accusations of polytheism (*shirk*). From a Twelver Shī‘ī theological perspective, such practices are understood as manifestations of Divine Mercy that operate entirely under God’s authority. The article refutes Salafi-Wahhabi critiques, particularly objections to posthumous intercession, by arguing that Prophets and Imams retain a spiritually dynamic role in *barzakh* (the intermediate realm), enabling them to intercede by divine will. The study concludes that *tawassul*, *istighātha*, and *shafā‘a* reinforce monotheistic principles, enhance spiritual connectivity, and remain integral to Shī‘ī devotional practice.

Keywords: *Tawassul*, *istighātha*, *shafā‘a*, intercession, *tawḥīd*, *shirk*.

1. Introduction

The use of intermediaries in Islamic spiritual practice—particularly *tawassul*, *istighātha*, and *shafā'a*—has long been a subject of debate in the Muslim world. These practices involve seeking help from God through the mediation of the Prophet (s.a.w.), the Imams (a.s.), other revered personalities,¹ sacred objects, and symbols² associated with divine grace and blessings. While many Muslims view these practices as means of strengthening their connection to God, others view them as reliance on beings other than Him, raising theological concerns about their permissibility.

This article explores the validity of *tawassul*, *istighātha* and *shafā'a* from a Twelver Shī'i perspective by examining pertinent verses from the Qur'ān,³ *ḥadīth* literature, and historical sources. These are analysed alongside secondary sources comprising extensive commentary from Twelver Shī'i scholars. The study assesses the theological implications of these practices and investigates whether they align with the core principles of Islam or represent a departure from its original

¹ By “revered personalities,” I refer to individuals who, while not divinely appointed like the Prophet (s.a.w.) or the Imams (a.s.), are held in high esteem due to their elevated spiritual status, as perceived in the eyes of God. This includes figures such as ‘Abbās and Zaynab, the children of ‘Alī (a.s.), and Muḥammad, the son of ‘Alī al-Hādī (a.s.).

² Sacred objects and symbols (*sha'ā'ir Allāh*) refer to sacred landmarks, rituals, and objects that signify devotion to God and serve as means of spiritual remembrance. The Qur'ān designates *al-Ṣafā* and *al-Marwa* as part of these sacred symbols (Q 2:158) and emphasises that revering them is a sign of piety (Q 22:32). Exegetes interpret *sha'ā'ir* broadly, encompassing acts of worship, sacred sites, and objects associated with Divine remembrance. In the Shī'i tradition, this concept extends to mourning rituals for Imam al-Ḥusayn (a.s.), relics of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (a.s.), and other elements that foster spiritual connection to God.

³ The Qur'ānic translations in this article are generally based on Ali Quli Qarai's translation.

teachings.

2. Definition of Key Terms

The terms *tawassul*, *istighātha*, and *shafā'a* derive their technical meanings from their original lexical roots, forming the basis for their theological interpretations. This link between language and usage is essential for understanding these concepts within the framework of Islamic belief and practice.

The root *w-s-l* is defined as “to seek to gain access or turn with a request.”⁴ *Tawassul*, or *wasīla*, refers to “a means of becoming near to a thing; it may be rendered a means of access, nearness, intimacy, ingratiating oneself, attachment, or connexion.”⁵ In practice, *tawassul* refers to seeking nearness to God through revered personalities, sacred objects, or symbols associated with Divine Grace.

As for *gh-w-th*, it is defined as “call for help, aid, succour.”⁶ *Istighātha*, is therefore, defined as “the act of seeking, desiring, or demanding aid or succour, either from or by means of a person or entity.”⁷ In practice, it refers to seeking help or aid directly from the Prophets, Imams, other revered figures, sacred objects or symbols associated with Divine authority and blessings, while keeping in mind the authority vested in them by God. It represents a more direct form of seeking assistance from the intermediary compared to *tawassul* as the intermediary is directly called upon.

Sh-f' is defined as “to double, attach, add, subjoin, enclose.”⁸ *Shafā'a* is defined as “the act of joining oneself to another as an

⁴ Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J Milton Cowan (Spoken Language Services, Inc: 1976), 1069.

⁵ Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (Librairie du Liban: 1863), 3053.

⁶ Wehr, *A Dictionary*, 687.

⁷ Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2305.

⁸ Wehr, *A Dictionary*, 478.

aider to him or a petitioner on their behalf; and in most instances the former person is one of higher station than the latter.”⁹ In theological terms, *shafā'a* denotes intercession: the act of an exalted figure—such as a Prophet or Imam—petitioning on behalf of an individual. This includes both seeking forgiveness in the hereafter and invoking blessings in this world.¹⁰

Istishfā' is therefore defined as seeking or asking for *shafā'a*. In its technical usage, it differs from *istighātha* in that it includes an explicit request to God, with the intermediary merely being asked to supplicate or intercede on one's behalf.

Tawassul and *shafā'a* are frequently translated as “intercession.” However, to preserve their distinct theological functions, *tawassul* is rendered in the present work as “mediation,” *shafā'a* as “intercession,” and *istishfā'* as “requesting intercession.” *Istighātha* is rendered as “implication,” reflecting its urgent and direct appeal to a revered figure for assistance, always within the framework of Divine authority.

These terms, which are interpreted differently across various Islamic schools of thought, will be used throughout the present work in accordance with the specific definitions outlined above.

⁹ Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1571.

¹⁰ The Shī'i scholars are unanimous in affirming that *shafā'a* encompasses the pardoning of sins in the hereafter. As for this world, Ja'far Subḥānī mentions that up until the 8th/14th century, there was consensus on its affirmation (Ja'far Subḥānī, *al-'Aqīda al-Islāmiyya 'alā Ḍaw' Madhhab Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.)* (Mu'assasat al-Imām al-Ṣādiq: 1998), 247). Some scholars maintain that *shafā'a* can also be sought for both spiritual and material benefits, as revered figures may serve as means for Divine Mercy in securing forgiveness and worldly blessings. This view is supported by supplications taught by the Imams (a.s.), including those of Imam al-Sajjād (a.s.) (the likes of *al-Ṣaḥīfa al-Sajjādiyya—Du'ā' 20: Makārim al-Akhḫāq*) in which he invokes blessings upon the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his family as a means of attaining Divine favour in this world.

Term	Translation	Definition	Direction of Request	Example
<i>Tawassul</i> (تَوَسَّلُ)	Mediation	Seeking closeness to God by invoking the status of revered figures, sacred objects, symbols, or rituals associated with Divine Grace.	The believer petitions God, using the intermediary as a means.	"O God, I ask You by Your Messenger, the Messenger of Mercy."
<i>Istighātha</i> (اِسْتِغَاثَةٌ)	Imploration	Directly imploring an intermediary for aid, while implicitly recognising that any assistance comes only through God's will.	The believer addresses the intermediary, while acknowledging that any help is granted by God.	"O Muhammad, help me in this matter."
<i>Istishfā'</i> (اِسْتِشْفَاعٌ)	Request for intercession	The act of the believer asking an intermediary to intercede with God on their behalf, seeking mercy or benefit.	The believer asks the intermediary to intercede with God.	"O 'Alī, I ask you to intercede for me with God."
<i>Shafā'a</i> (شَفَاعَةٌ)	Intercession	The act of intercession itself, whereby an intermediary appeals to God on behalf of a believer, seeking mercy or benefit.	The intermediary appeals to God on behalf of the believer.	The Prophet (s.a.w.) appeals to God: "O Lord, forgive this believer, for he sought nearness to You through me and trusted in Your mercy."

Table 1. Meanings and functions of *tawassul*, *istighātha*, *istishfā'* and *shafā'a*.

1	All involve seeking divine aid through revered personalities, objects, or symbols associated with God's grace.
2	Each practice relies on Divine Will and permission.
3	They function as means to strengthen the believer's connection to God.
4	They affirm the elevated status of the intermediaries.
5	They reinforce the belief that intermediaries possess no independent power; all efficacy is contingent upon God's decree.

Table 2. Similarities between *tawassul*, *istighātha* and *shafā'a*.

3. Historical Context

3.1 Pre-Islamic Arabia (Period of *Jāhiliyya*)

In pre-Islamic Arabia, various tribes practiced polytheism, worshipping multiple idols and deities alongside God.¹¹ While many acknowledged God as the ultimate Creator and Sustainer,¹² they believed these idols and tribal gods could serve as intermediaries to gain His favour. They perceived God as distant and beyond direct access, leading them to

¹¹ In *Kitāb al-aṣnām*, Ibn al-Kalbī records that the idol Wadd was worshipped by the Kalb tribe, Suwa' by Hudhayl, Yaghūth by Madhḥij and Jurash, Ya'ūq by Khaywān and Naṣr by Ḥimyar (Hishām Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-aṣnām* (al-Maṭba'at al-Amīriyya: 1914)). A similar account is attributed to Ibn 'Abbās, though with slight variations in details, as noted in *Tafsīr al-Mīzān* in the discussion under Q 71:23 (Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*, trans. Tawus Raja, <https://www.almizan.org/>, accessed 31st March 2025, 39:47–49). Additionally, *Kitāb al-aṣnām* documents other tribes that engaged in idol worship and lists the idols they adopted.

¹² Q 29:61:

﴿وَلَمَّا سَأَلْتَهُمْ مَنْ خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَسَخَّرَ الشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ لَيَقُولُنَّ اللَّهُ فَأَنَّى يُؤْفَكُونَ﴾

If you ask them, “Who created the heavens and the earth and disposed the sun and the moon?” They will surely say, “God.” Then where do they stray?

Q 29:63 also affirms this belief.

seek blessings, protection, and guidance through these intermediaries. However, they attributed to these idols an independent influence or authority in facilitating their needs, a belief that fundamentally contradicted the concept of God's absolute oneness and sovereignty.¹³ Numerous idols were placed atop and inside sacred places of worship like the Ka'ba and became pilgrimage sites, reinforcing the cultural and spiritual significance of these intermediaries. Rituals of pilgrimage often included sacrifices, offerings, and prayers directed towards the idols independently.

Despite the prevalence of polytheism, traces of monotheistic understanding existed, as reflected in their acknowledgment of God's Supreme authority. However, this understanding was overshadowed by their reliance on intermediaries, driven by the subtle belief that God's favour was accessible only through them. Satan had deceived people into believing that noble figures of the past possessed independent power. This misconception led people to create idols in their honour and eventually worship them, straying from the worship of God alone.¹⁴

¹³ There is an apparent contradiction in the belief of the pagans, which the Qur'an highlights in Q 29:63:

﴿وَلَيْنِ سَأَلْتَهُمْ مَنْ نَزَّلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَأَحْيَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا لَيَقُولُنَّ اللَّهُ قُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ﴾

And if you ask them, "Who sends down water from the sky, with which He revives the earth after its death?" They will surely say, "God." Say, "All praise belongs to God!" But most of them do not exercise their reason.

The pagans failed to reconcile their recognition of God's supreme authority with their reliance on powerless intermediaries, whom they regarded as partners to God. Despite recognising God's absolute control over the forces of nature, they still sought the intercession of idols or other figures they believed had some power in their lives. This contradiction exposed their inability to fully grasp the monotheistic principle that God alone holds ultimate authority and power.

¹⁴ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mīzān*, 39:48.

Differences	Pagan Practices	Islamic Reorientation
1	Idols and tribal gods were believed to have independent authority.	Intermediaries act only by God's will and permission.
2	Idols and tribal gods were seen as necessary to access God.	Intermediaries are honoured, but God remains directly accessible.
3	Practices were condemned by the Qur'an (Q 29:63).	Practices were affirmed by the Qur'an under divine sanction (Q 5:35).

Table 3. Differences between pagan practices of intermediaries and Islamic reorientation.

Islam condemned these practices but did not abolish the concept of intermediaries altogether. Instead, it reoriented it within a monotheistic framework. The Qur'an and *ḥadīth* clarified that mediation could only occur with God's permission. This transformation marked a significant theological shift, preserving the innate human inclination to seek assistance but now strictly aligning it with monotheistic principles.

3.2 Early Islam

With the revelation of the Holy Qur'an, God reaffirmed the legitimacy of seeking intermediaries, emphasising that such practices, when done in accordance with Divine Will, hold a rightful place in Islam.

One notable example is the incident of Prophet Ya'qūb, who, after losing his sight due to grief over his son Yūsuf, used Yūsuf's shirt as a means to regain his vision.

﴿فَلَمَّا أَنْ جَاءَ الْبَشِيرُ أَلْقَاهُ عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِ فَارْتَدَّ بَصِيرًا﴾

When the bearer of good news arrived, he cast it [the shirt of Yūsuf] on his face, and he regained his sight (Q 12:96).

This act, performed through God's will, highlights the acceptance of intermediaries as a means for Divine intervention, demonstrating that such practices were not only acknowledged but also sanctioned by God, as prophets are divinely protected from committing anything forbidden.

Furthermore, the Qur'an firmly established the foundations of intermediaries when it told the Prophet (s.a.w.):

﴿وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ إِذْ ظَلَمُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ جَاءُوكَ فَاسْتَغْفَرُوا اللَّهَ وَأَسْتَغْفَرَ لَهُمُ الرَّسُولُ لَوَجَدُوا اللَّهَ تَوَّابًا رَحِيمًا﴾

Had they, when they wronged themselves, come to you and pleaded to God for forgiveness, and the Apostle had pleaded forgiveness for them, they would have surely found God clement and merciful (Q 4:64).

This practice was subsequently upheld by the community.¹⁵ They sought forgiveness, victory in battles, cure of ailments, and rain through the Prophet (s.a.w.). These examples demonstrate a Divinely sanctioned tradition of seeking God's blessings through His chosen servants, objects and symbols associated with Divine blessings, as long as it is understood that the intermediary is only a means and does not possess independent power.

3.3 Post-Prophetic to Pre-Occultation

After the demise of Prophet Muḥammad (s.a.w.), his companions continued to seek intermediation through him by visiting his grave and supplicating to God through his status. Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī al-Andalusī, a Sunnī exegete, mentions in his exegesis of the aforementioned verse (Q 4:64), that he found a narration reported from 'Alī (a.s.) that he said:

قَدِمَ عَلَيْنَا أَعْرَابِيٌّ بَعْدَمَا دَفَنَّا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ بِثَلَاثَةِ أَيَّامٍ، فَرَمَى

¹⁵ Illustrative examples of this will be discussed in the following section.

بِنَفْسِهِ عَلَى قَبْرِهِ، وَحَتَّىٰ مِنْ تُرَابِهِ عَلَى رَأْسِهِ، ثُمَّ قَالَ: يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، قُلْتَ
فَسَمِعْنَا قَوْلَكَ، وَوَعَيْتَ عَنِ اللَّهِ، فَوَعَيْتَنَا عَنْكَ، وَكَانَ فِيمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ:
﴿وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ إِذْ ظَلَمُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ جَاءُوكَ﴾ الْآيَةَ، وَقَدْ ظَلَمْتُ نَفْسِي، وَجِئْتُ
أَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ ذَنْبِي، فَاسْتَغْفِرْ لِي مِنْ رَبِّي، فَنُودِيَ مِنَ الْقَبْرِ أَنَّهُ قَدْ غُفِرَ لَكَ.

An Arab came to us three days after we had buried the Messenger of God (s.a.w.) and threw himself on his grave and sprinkled some of its soil on his head. Then he said, “O Messenger of God, we heard your words, and you understood from God, so we understood from you, and among what God revealed to you was, ‘And if they had wronged themselves, they had come to you’ [Q 4:64]. I have wronged myself and have come to ask for the forgiveness of God for my sin, so ask forgiveness for me from my Lord.” Then there was a call from the grave, “You have been forgiven.”¹⁶

Additionally, the Companions practiced *tawassul* through figures like ‘Abbās, the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s uncle, as recorded in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*:

... أَنَّ عُمَرَ بْنَ الْخَطَّابِ، كَانَ إِذَا قَحَطُوا اسْتَسْقَى بِالْعَبَّاسِ بْنِ عَبْدِ الْمُطَّلِبِ،
فَقَالَ: اَللّٰهُمَّ اِنَّا كُنَّا نَتَوَسَّلُ اِلَيْكَ بِنَبِيِّنَا صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ، فَتَسْقِينَا، وَاِنَّا
نَتَوَسَّلُ اِلَيْكَ بِعَمِّ نَبِيِّنَا، فَاسْقِنَا. قَالَ: فَيُسْقَوْنَ.

Whenever there was drought, ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb used to ask God for rain through al-‘Abbās b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, saying, “O God, we used to ask You for rain through our Prophet, and You would give us. Now we ask You for rain

¹⁶ Muḥammad b. Yūsuf Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī, *al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ* (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya: 1993). Accessed 31st March 2025, <https://quran-tafsir.net/hayyan>.

through the uncle of the Prophet, so give us rain.” And they would be given rain.¹⁷

Figures such as Yazīd b. Aswad were likewise approached to supplicate for rainfall.¹⁸

The Imams (a.s.) also emphasised the importance of visiting the grave of the Prophet (s.a.w.), performing *tawassul* through him, and seeking *istighātha* from him.¹⁹ They taught that these practices are not

¹⁷ Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 62, *ḥadīth* 60, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/>, accessed 31st March 2025.

¹⁸ Muʿāwiya b. Abū Sufyān asked for rain from Yazīd b. al-Aswad. He said, “O God, we seek intercession from You through our best ones. O Yazīd, raise your hands to God” (Ṣāʿib ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, *Ziyāra wa-l-tawassul min al-maṣādir al-ʿaḳāʿid ʿind al-Shīʿa al-Imāmiyya* (Markaz al-Risāla: 2000), 148).

¹⁹ In a detailed narration on the etiquette of *ziyāra* (visitation) of the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s grave, Imam al-Ṣādiq (a.s.) instructs that at the closest location to the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s head by his grave, one should say, “I testify that you are the Messenger of God and you are Muḥammad, son of ʿAbdullāh. I testify that you announced the messages of your Lord, advised your nation, fought in the way of God, and worshipped God with wisdom and by giving good counsel, until that which is certain [death] came to you. You fulfilled your obligations and were kind toward the believers and harsh toward the disbelievers. Therefore, God granted you the highest honoured position of the honourable ones.” He continues, “O God, You said, ‘And had they, when they were unjust to themselves, come to you and asked forgiveness of God and the Messenger had (also) asked forgiveness for them, they would have found God Oft returning (to mercy), Most Merciful’ [Q 4:64]. I have come to Your Prophet, repenting and asking for forgiveness for my sins, and I have turned to You through Your Prophet, the Prophet of Mercy, Muḥammad. O Muḥammad, I have turned to God, Your Lord and mine, through you, so that He forgives my sins.” Imam al-Ṣādiq (a.s.) further advises, “If you have a request, face the *qibla* with your back toward the grave, raise your hands, and ask for your

limited to seeking forgiveness, but also include seeking blessings, divine mercy, and healing, even through objects associated with the Prophet (s.a.w.), such as his pulpit²⁰ and the marble surrounding his grave.²¹ They made clear that seeking the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s intercession is a manifestation of God’s mercy, not a contradiction to monotheism, and a means through which a person attains what God has decreed for them.²² In the Twelver Shī‘ī creed, the practices of *tawassul* and *istighātha* naturally extended to the Imams (a.s.), who are regarded as the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s Divinely appointed successors and chosen intercessors.

request. [If you do this,] your request will more likely be granted, God willing” (Ibn Qulawayh, *Kāmil al-Ziyārāt* (al-Maṭba‘at al-Mubārakat al-Murtaḍawiyya: 1937), 2: chapter 3, *ḥadīth* 1).

²⁰ Imam al-Ṣādiq (a.s.) is reported to have said, “After you finish your invocations next to the grave of the Prophet, proceed to the pulpit. Rub your hands on it and then hold its two bottom knobs. Rub your face and eyes on them, for it is said that they cure the eyes. Thereafter, stand by the pulpit, praise God, glorify Him, and then ask for your needs. The Messenger of God said, “There is a garden from the gardens of Paradise between my pulpit and my grave. My pulpit is placed over an oasis from the oases of Paradise, and its pillars were built in Paradise” (Ibid., 2: chapter 3, *ḥadīth* 2).

²¹ Imam al-Kāzīm (a.s.) reports that his father (Imam al-Ṣādiq (a.s.) said that his grandfather (Imam al-Bāqir (a.s.) said, “Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn [Imam al-Sajjād (a.s.)] used to stand next to the grave of the Prophet and say *salām* to the Messenger of God and testify that he announced the message of God. Then he used to recite any prayer that would come to his mind. Thereafter, he would lean his back on the very delicate green marble that is attached to the grave of the Messenger of God and recite a specific supplication” (Ibid., 2: chapter 3, *ḥadīth* 3).

²² Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṣaffār, *Baṣā‘ir al-Darajāt* (Maktabat Ayatollah al-Mar‘ashī al-Najafī: 1983), 86, *ḥadīth* 6.

3.4 Post-Occultation

After the occultation of the twelfth Imam (a.s.), Shī'ī scholars played a crucial role in preserving the foundations of *tawassul*, *istighātha* and *shafā'a*. These concepts were documented in works such as *al-Kāfi* by al-Kulaynī. While al-Kulaynī primarily focused on compiling and preserving authentic narrations from the Imams (a.s.), his meticulous effort laid the groundwork for later scholars to delve deeper into these narrations. Subsequent scholars offered detailed analysis to clarify the theological significance of seeking mediation through the Prophet (s.a.w.), the Imams (a.s.) and sacred objects and symbols.

During this period, *ziyāra*²³ was further established as a cornerstone of Shī'ī devotional life. Works like *Kāmil al-ziyārāt* by Ibn Qūlawayh documented the merits and etiquettes of visiting these shrines, emphasising the benefits of doing *tawassul* and *istighātha* through these holy figures at their resting places.

Shī'ī scholars, such as 'Allāma al-Ḥillī in *Kashf al-murād* and Ib-rāhīm b. 'Alī al-Kaf'amī in his supplicatory books, *al-Balad al-amīn* and *Miṣbāḥ al-Kaf'amī*, actively defended these practices, particularly when confronted with accusations of polytheism and innovation by Sunnī scholars and reformist movements, such as the school of Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya.

3.5 Contemporary Responses

The rise of Salafism and Wahhabism intensified scrutiny of Shī'ī Twelver practices, leading to increased accusations of polytheism and

²³ *Ziyāra* refers to the act of visiting sacred sites or shrines, typically of revered personalities. Among the prominent locations for *ziyāra* are the Prophet (s.a.w.)'s Mosque in Medina, the shrine of Imam 'Alī (a.s.) in Najaf, the shrine of Imam al-Ḥusayn (a.s.) in Karbala and the shrine of Imam al-Riḍā (a.s.) in Mashhad. These visits hold deep spiritual significance, serving as a means to seek closeness to God and honour the legacy of these holy figures.

innovation. This period saw the destruction of gravesites in Baqī‘ cemetery and restrictions on supplicating to the Prophet (s.a.w.) at his graveside.

Despite these challenges, Shī‘ī scholars have steadfastly maintained the permissibility of *tawassul*, *istighātha* and *shafā‘a*. Ayatollah Sayyid Abū l-Qāsim al-Khū‘ī was asked a question on the permissibility of asking for a child, sustenance, protection, safety, and the like directly from the Infallibles (a.s.), not because they create or provide sustenance, but because they are the means to God Almighty in fulfilling needs and do not do anything except with His permission. The Ayatollah simply responded by saying: “There is no problem if it is with that intention.”²⁴

Ayatollah Sayyid Muḥammad Sa‘īd al-Ḥakīm in his *istiftā’*²⁵ on his website responds to someone who asked about the permissibility of saying “O ‘Alī!”. He says:

Yes, that is permissible, because seeking help from other than God is permissible if it is based on faith and belief that God is the Creator and Authority, and that all powers and abilities begin with Him and return to Him, and that the one seeking help does not receive help except with His permission. As we see when a person falls into a situation in which he needs the help of others, he may seek help from his brother or his clan or something similar.²⁶

When Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani was informed of a group who directed their requests to Imam ‘Alī (a.s.), placing their hopes in him

²⁴ Mīrzā Jawād al-Tabrīzī, *Ṣirāṭ al-najāh* (Daftar-i Nashr-i Barguzīdi: 1995), 1:466 (Question 1306).

²⁵ *Istiftā’* refers to the act of seeking a formal legal opinion (*fatwā*) from a qualified Islamic jurist.

²⁶ Office of Grand Ayatollah al-Ḥakīm, “Fatwas & Questions, Question 3,” <https://www.alhakeem.com/ar/questions/27/2/>, accessed 30th March 2025.

and not supplicating (exclusively) to God, he was asked about the validity of such practices. He responded:

We do not think that anyone calls upon Imam ‘Alī with the assumption that he is independent in his affairs and acts in the world as a god. In fact, everyone who calls upon him and asks him for something, calls upon him because he is one of the close vicegerents of God, so he is an intermediary between God and His creation. God Almighty only forbade seeking mediation from those for whom God did not give proof and authority, such as idols, but He did not forbid seeking mediation from the Prophets and vicegerents.²⁷

These scholars—and many more—have emphasised that *tawassul*, *istighātha*, and *shafā‘a* remain deeply rooted in Qur’ānic principles and authentic traditions, forming a vital component of Shī‘ī spiritual practice.

4. The Qur’ānic Basis

The verses presented in this section do not represent an exhaustive list addressing *tawassul*, *shafā‘a*, and *istighātha*. They are merely a selection intended to illustrate key principles and conditions found within the Qur’ānic discourse on these topics.

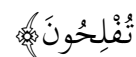
4.1 *Tawassul*

The permissibility of *Tawassul* is acknowledged in the Qur’ān, and the verses selected in this section serve as a representative sample to demonstrate the validity and legitimacy of this practice within the Qur’ānic framework.

4.1.1 First Verse

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَابْتَغُوا إِلَيْهِ الْوَسِيلَةَ وَجَاهِدُوا فِي سَبِيلِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ

²⁷ Muḥammad Kāzīm al-Jashī, *al-Fawā'id al-Fiqhiyya* (Dar al-Wilā': 2006), 2:174 (Question 448).



O you who have faith! Be wary of God, and seek the means of recourse to Him, and wage *jihād*²⁸ in His way, so that you may be felicitous (Q 5:35).

In this verse, God enjoins the believers with three fundamental commandments that must be adhered to in order to attain felicity. The first commandment is to remain conscious of Him by being wary and mindful of His presence. The second is to seek a means of recourse (*tawassul*) to Him, and the third is to strive and wage jihad in His path.

The concept of a “means of recourse” mentioned in the verse can be understood in two ways: a general meaning and a specific meaning.

- a. General meaning: This refers to any action that brings one closer to God. Examples include holding firm belief in God and His Divinely Appointed Guides, performing the obligatory daily prayers, and fulfilling other mandatory acts of worship. These actions serve as general pathways to achieve nearness to the Divine.
- b. Specific meaning: Within the broader understanding, there exists a specific interpretation, which includes seeking closeness to God by asking Him through the intercession of revered figures and sacred objects and symbols.²⁹

The specific meaning is further supported by the traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) concerning this verse, such as the following report

²⁸ *Jihād* refers to the exertion of one’s utmost power, effort, endeavour, or ability in contending with an object of disapproval. It encompasses three forms: a visible enemy [in war], against the devil, and against one’s lower self.

²⁹ Adapted from Nāṣir Makārim Shirāzī, *al-Amthāl fi Tafṣīr Kitāb Allāh al-Munzal* (Mu’assasat al-A‘lā li-l-Maṭbū‘āt: 2013), 3:694.

transmitted by Salmān³⁰ from Imam ‘Alī (a.s.):

... أَعْطَاهُ الْوَسِيلَةَ فِي الْوَصِيَّةِ، وَلَا يُخَلِّي أُمَّتَهُ مِنْ وَسِيلَتِهِ إِلَيْهِ، وَإِلَى اللَّهِ، فَقَالَ:
﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَبْتَغُوا إِلَيْهِ الْوَسِيلَةَ﴾.

God has given him [Prophet Muḥammad (s.a.w.)] the means of intercession, and his nation will not be left without his means of intercession to Him and to God. God said, “O you who have faith! Be wary of God, and seek the means of recourse to Him” (Q 5:35).³¹

4.1.2 Second Verse

﴿قَالُوا يَا أَبَانَا أَسْتَغْفِرُ لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَا إِنَّا كُنَّا خَاطِعِينَ﴾ قَالَ سَوْفَ أَسْتَغْفِرُ لَكُمْ
رَبِّي إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْعَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ﴾

They [the brothers of Yūsuf (a.s.)] said, “Father! Plead with God for forgiveness of our sins! We have indeed been erring.”

He said, “I shall plead with my Lord to forgive you; indeed, He is the All-forgiving, the All-merciful” (Q 12:97–98).

This is one of the clearest verses supporting the permissibility of *tawassul*. After realising their mistakes, the brothers of Prophet Yūsuf (a.s.) turned to their father, Prophet Ya‘qūb (a.s.), asking him to act as an intermediary and plead for God’s forgiveness on their behalf. Prophet Ya‘qūb (a.s.) accepted their request, promising to seek forgiveness for them. By highlighting this interaction, the Qur’ān demonstrates that seeking forgiveness through an intermediary is not only compatible with monotheism but is also a means of attaining God’s

³⁰ Salmān al-Muḥammadī—commonly known as Salmān al-Fārisī—was a close companion of the Prophet Muḥammad (s.a.w.) and Imām ‘Alī (a.s.). Imām al-Ṣādiq (a.s.) stressed calling him “al-Muḥammadī” instead of “al-Fārisī”.

³¹ Al-Ṣaffār, *Baṣā’ir al-Darajāt*, 216.

mercy and approval.

4.1.3 Other Verses

﴿وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ إِذْ ظَلَمُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ جَاءُوكَ فَاسْتَغْفَرُوا اللَّهَ وَأَسْتَغْفَرَ لَهُمُ الرَّسُولُ لَوَجَدُوا اللَّهَ تَوَّابًا رَحِيمًا﴾

Had they, when they wronged themselves, come to you and pleaded to God for forgiveness, and the Apostle had pleaded forgiveness for them, they would have surely found God Clement and Merciful (Q 4:64).

﴿وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ تَعَالَوْا يَسْتَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ لَوَّوْا رُؤُوسَهُمْ وَرَأَيْتَهُمْ يَصُدُّونَ وَهُمْ مُسْتَكْبِرُونَ﴾

When they are told, “Come, that God’s Apostle may plead for forgiveness for you,” they twist their heads, and you see them turn away disdainfully (Q 63:5).

Both these verses strongly affirm the legitimacy of *tawassul* through the Prophet (s.a.w.). In the first verse, the Qur’ān explicitly connects God’s mercy and forgiveness to the act of seeking the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s intercession, stating that had they come to him, they would have surely found God merciful. This demonstrates that while forgiveness ultimately comes from God, approaching Him through the Prophet (s.a.w.) is a highly recommended and effective means of receiving God’s mercy. By including the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s plea in the process, the verse further highlights the elevated role of the Prophet (s.a.w.) as an intermediary between God and His creation. It underscores that turning to him for intercession is not only permissible but a means to expedite Divine Forgiveness.

In the second verse, the hypocrites are told, “Come, that God’s Apostle may plead for forgiveness for you”—yet they remain arrogant and stubborn. God condemns them for refusing to humble themselves by seeking the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s intercession. This disdainful rejection

of the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s role as an intermediary is portrayed as a sign of arrogance and spiritual failure. The verse implies that seeking the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s intercession is not only permissible but an act of humility and acknowledgment of his special status with God.

Together, these verses affirm that seeking forgiveness through the Prophet (s.a.w.) is a divinely sanctioned practice that aligns with monotheism. It reflects the recognition of the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s unique position as a bridge between the believers and their Creator, emphasising that such intercession is an honoured and encouraged means of attaining God’s forgiveness and mercy.

4.1.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of *tawassul* is deeply rooted in the Qur’ān and is both permissible and encouraged in Islam. The verses quoted above illustrate the legitimacy of approaching God through Divinely chosen intermediaries like the Prophet (s.a.w.) and the righteous servants of God. These verses highlight that seeking mediation—whether through the Prophet (s.a.w.), Imams (a.s.), or other righteous figures—does not contradict monotheism. Rather, it affirms it by recognising God as the ultimate source of mercy and forgiveness, while also emphasising humility, obedience, and acknowledgment of God’s chosen intermediaries, thus aligning fully with Islamic teachings.

4.2 *Istighātha*

Istighātha, as a standalone concept previously defined, is not explicitly mentioned in the Qur’ān. However, certain Qur’ānic verses describe situations where individuals seek assistance from God’s creation, and these scenarios can serve as evidence for its permissibility under certain conditions.

Some of the instances mentioned in the Qur’ān are as follows.

4.2.1 The Israelite Seeking Help from Prophet Mūsā (a.s.)

﴿وَدَخَلَ الْمَدِينَةَ عَلَىٰ حِينِ غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ أَهْلِهَا فَوَجَدَ فِيهَا رَجُلَيْنِ يُفْتَنَانِ هَذَا

مِنْ شَيْعَتِهِ وَهَذَا مِنْ عَدُوِّهِ فَاسْتَعَاثَهُ الَّذِي مِنْ شَيْعَتِهِ عَلَى الَّذِي مِنْ عَدُوِّهِ
فَوَكَرَهُ مُوسَى فَقَضَى عَلَيْهِ ﴿١٥﴾

[One day] he entered the city at a time when its people were not likely to take notice. He found there two men fighting, this one from among his followers and that one from his enemies. The one who was from his followers sought his help against him who was from his enemies, So Moses hit him with his fist, whereupon he expired (Q 28:15).

This verse directly uses the word *istaghāthahu* (“he sought his help”). The follower of Prophet Mūsā (a.s.), oppressed by his enemy, sought direct aid from Prophet Mūsā (a.s.), who responded by intervening. Since he was a follower, the Prophet could have told him to ask God for assistance or to endure patiently, but he intervened instead. This incident shows that seeking assistance from a righteous person in a worldly matter is permissible when done with the understanding that ultimate power resides with God.

4.2.2 The People Asking Dhū l-Qarnayn for Assistance

﴿قَالُوا يَا ذَا الْقَرْنَيْنِ إِنَّ يَأْجُوجَ وَمَأْجُوجَ مُفْسِدُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَهَلْ نَجْعَلُ لَكَ
خَرْجًا عَلَىٰ أَنْ تَجْعَلَ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَهُمْ سَدًّا﴾
﴿قَالَ مَا مَكَّنِّي فِيهِ رَبِّي خَيْرٌ فَأَعِينُونِي بِقُوَّةٍ أَجْعَلْ بَيْنَكُمْ وَبَيْنَهُمْ رَدْمًا﴾

They said, “O Dhul Qarnayn! Gog and Magog are indeed causing disaster in this land. Shall we pay you a tribute on condition that you build a barrier between them and us?”

He said, “What my Lord has furnished me is better. Yet help me with some power, and I will make a bulwark between you and them” (Q 18:94–95).

The people directly requested help from Dhū l-Qarnayn to construct a barrier against Gog and Magog. He accepted their request, while acknowledging that his ability to help stems from God. This example underscores the permissibility of seeking assistance from individuals for protection and problem-solving with the understanding that it is only through God's power that one can be helped. It is similar to the situation where a believer goes to a doctor for medical help, knowing fully well that the ultimate curer is God.

One might object that these incidents occurred during the lifetimes of Prophet Mūsā (a.s.) and Dhū l-Qarnayn, and that *istighātha* after death is invalid. This objection will be addressed in the section "Refutation of common misconceptions" (Argument 2).

4.3 *Shafā'a*

4.3.1 Verses Supporting *Shafā'a*

The following are some of the verses that demonstrate that *shafā'a* is a privilege granted by God to certain individuals, such as Prophets and righteous servants, in accordance with His will and wisdom.

﴿مَا مِنْ شَفِيعٍ إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ إِذْنِهِ﴾

There is no intercessor, except after His leave (Q 10:3).

﴿مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَشْفَعُ عِنْدَهُ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِهِ﴾

Who is it that may intercede with Him except with His permission (Q 2:255)?

4.3.2 Verses Seemingly Opposing *Shafā'a*

Other verses seemingly oppose *shafā'a*.

﴿لَيْسَ لَهُمْ مِنْ دُونِهِ وَلِيٌّ وَلَا شَفِيعٌ﴾

Besides him (God) they will have neither friend nor intercessor (Q 6:51).

﴿فَمَا تَنْفَعُهُمْ شَفَاعَةُ الشَّافِعِينَ﴾

So the intercession of the intercessors will not avail them (Q 74:48).

﴿أَمْ آتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ شُفَعَاءَ﴾

﴿قُلْ لِلَّهِ الشَّفَاعَةُ جَمِيعًا﴾

Have they taken intercessors besides God?

Say, "All intercession rests with God" (Q 39:43/44)

4.3.3 Reconciling the Two Sets of Verses

The verses concerning *shafā'a* in the Qur'ān may initially appear contradictory, with some affirming it under certain conditions and others seemingly negating it altogether. However, as all these verses are part of the Qur'ānic revelation, they must be understood in a manner that maintains their coherence. A closer analysis shows that these verses in fact complement each other by outlining the conditions, limitations, and ultimate purpose of intercession in Islamic doctrine.

All the verses that affirm *shafā'a* set out specific conditions. The first is that God's permission is essential, and no intercession can occur without His authorisation. The second is that the intercessor must be granted authority to intercede.

Furthermore, the one on whose behalf intercession is sought must also be approved.

The Qur'ān says:

﴿وَلَا يَشْفَعُونَ إِلَّا لِمَنْ أَرَزَقْنَاهُ﴾

And they do not intercede except for someone He approves for (Q 21:28).

However, *shafā'a* becomes ineffective for persistent sinners or polytheists. The Qur'ān tells the polytheists:

﴿وَلَا يَمْلِكُ الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ الشَّفَاعَةَ إِلَّا مَنْ شَهِدَ بِالْحَقِّ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ﴾

Those whom they invoke (in worship) besides Him have no power of intercession, except those who are witness to the truth and who know for whom to intercede (Q 43:86).

This verse highlights that invoking false deities demonstrates a lack of acknowledgment of God's authority, thereby disqualifying one from benefiting from divinely sanctioned intercession.

Furthermore, the promise of *shafā'a* on the Day of Judgment must not be viewed as an unconditional guarantee. Every individual is ultimately responsible for their own actions. If a person neglects accountability, relies solely on the prospect of *shafā'a*, and persists in deliberate sinfulness, they will not benefit from the intercession of those granted permission to intercede.

In addition, *shafā'a* is a favour granted by God, and He must be recognised as the ultimate authority. If one neglects this fundamental principle, the prospect of *shafā'a* will hold no benefit for them.

In conclusion, the verses do not contradict one another; rather, they establish the parameters of *shafā'a*. *Shafā'a* is a Divinely regulated mercy: It is neither absolutely denied nor unconditionally granted. It is a manifestation of God's mercy, bestowed in accordance with His justice and wisdom, and operates within the framework of divine accountability.

5. *Ḥadīth* Literature

The *ḥadīth* cited in this section are drawn from both Shī'ī and Sunnī sources and serve as representative examples of how the concepts of *tawassul*, *shafā'a*, and *istighātha* were understood and practiced in the early Islamic tradition. While not all of these narrations may meet the highest standards of authenticity (*ṣaḥīḥ*), the abundance and consistency of such reports across diverse collections and contexts strongly reinforce the foundational presence of these practices.

5.1 *Tawassul*

5.1.1 Shī'a

Below are two profound examples from Imam al-Bāqir (a.s.), and one from Imam al-Sajjād (a.s.), that highlight the role of *tawassul* in times of need.³²

Imam al-Bāqir (a.s.) narrates that a man came to the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) and said, “O Messenger of God, I have a [large] family, and I am indebted; and my situation has become difficult. Please teach me a prayer through which God will provide me enough to pay my debts and help my family.” The Messenger of God said, “Perform ablution properly, then perform a two-unit prayer completed with bowing and prostrating in each unit. Thereafter say:

يَا مَاجِدُ، يَا وَاحِدُ، يَا كَرِيمُ، أَتَوَجَّهُ إِلَيْكَ بِمُحَمَّدٍ نَبِيِّكَ، نَبِيِّ الرَّحْمَةِ. يَا مُحَمَّدُ،
يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، إِنِّي أَتَوَجَّهُ بِكَ إِلَى اللَّهِ رَبِّكَ وَرَبِّ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ.

O Majestic, O One, O Gracious, I turn to You through Muḥammad, Your prophet, the prophet of mercy. O Muḥammad, O Messenger of God, I have turned to you before God, your Lord and the Lord of all things ...³³

In another narration, Imam al-Bāqir (a.s.) provides further guidance on seeking help from God through *tawassul*. He says, “if you want to ask your Lord for something, perform ablution, perform a two-unit prayer, speak of the greatness of God [in it], send salutations to Muḥammad and his progeny, and upon completion say:

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَسْأَلُكَ بِأَنَّكَ مَلِكٌ، وَأَنَّكَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ مُفْتَدِرٌ، وَبِأَنَّكَ مَا
تَشَاءُ مِنْ أَمْرٍ يَكُونُ. اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَتَوَجَّهُ إِلَيْكَ بِنَبِيِّكَ مُحَمَّدٍ نَبِيِّ الرَّحْمَةِ (صَلَّى اللَّهُ

³² These are in addition to the ones cited in the post-prophetic to pre-occultation section.

³³ Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī. *al-Kāfi*, 3, book 4, chapter 94, *ḥadīth* 2.

عَلَيْهِ وَآلِهِ). يَا مُحَمَّدُ، يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، إِنِّي أَتَوَجَّهُ بِكَ إِلَى اللَّهِ رَبِّكَ وَرَبِّي لِيُنْجِحَ
لِي طَلِبَتِي. اللَّهُمَّ بِنَبِيِّكَ أَنْجِحْ لِي طَلِبَتِي بِمُحَمَّدٍ، ثُمَّ سَلْ حَاجَتَكَ.

O God, I ask You, for You are the King and You have power over all things. And whatever You will of something, will be. O God, I turn to You through Your Prophet, Muhammad, the Prophet of Mercy (s.a.w.). O Muhammad, O Messenger of God, I turn through you to God, Your Lord and my Lord, so that He grants me my request. O God, through Your Prophet, Muhammad, grant my request. Then ask for your needs.³⁴

Furthermore, in Du‘ā’ Abū Ḥamza al-Thumālī, Imam al-Sajjād (a.s.) explicitly appeals to Divine generosity through the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his family, saying:

أَيْنَ كَرَمِكَ يَا كَرِيمٌ؟ بِهِ وَمُحَمَّدٍ وَآلِ مُحَمَّدٍ فَاسْتَنْقِذْنِي.

Where is Your generosity, O Generous One? Through it, and through Muḥammad and the family of Muḥammad, rescue me!

This supplication illustrates that Divine generosity is sought through the noble intercession of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (a.s.), reinforcing the concept of *tawassul*.

5.1.2 Sunnī

Similarly, Sunnī traditions also offer evidence supporting the practice of *tawassul*. As mentioned in Section 3.3, the report in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* provides significant evidence in support of *tawassul*. Another widely cited Sunnī *ḥadīth* provides further validation of the practice.

Al-Tirmidhī quotes a report, which he and Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī grade as *ṣaḥīḥ*, from ‘Uthmān b. Ḥunayf, who narrates that a

³⁴ Ibid., 3, book 4, chapter 95, *ḥadīth* 7.

blind man came to the Prophet (s.a.w.) and said, “Supplicate to God to heal me.” The Prophet (s.a.w.) replied, “If you wish, I will supplicate for you, and if you wish, you can be patient, for that is better for you.” The man said, “Then supplicate for me.” The Prophet (s.a.w.) instructed him to perform ablution properly and then to supplicate with this prayer:

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَسْأَلُكَ، وَأَتَوَجَّهُ إِلَيْكَ بِنَبِيِّكَ مُحَمَّدٍ نَبِيِّ الرَّحْمَةِ. إِنِّي تَوَجَّهْتُ بِهِ إِلَى
رَبِّي فِي حَاجَتِي هَذِهِ لِتُقْضَى لِي، اللَّهُمَّ فَشَفِّعْهُ فِيَّ.

O God, indeed, I ask You and turn to You through Your Prophet Muḥammad, the Prophet of mercy. Indeed, I have turned through him [Muḥammad] to my Lord regarding this need of mine, so that it may be fulfilled for me. O God, accept his intercession on my behalf.³⁵

This supplication emphasises the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s status as a Divinely appointed intermediary, reflecting the permissibility and effectiveness of *tawassul* as a means of seeking God’s assistance. By guiding the blind man to invoke God through the Prophet (s.a.w.), this narration not only underscores the legitimacy of intercession but also demonstrates the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s acknowledgment of his role as a means of Divine Mercy.

5.2 *Istighātha*

5.2.1 Shī‘a

The two Shī‘ī *ḥadīth* cited earlier in 5.1.1 from Imam al-Bāqir (a.s.) regarding *tawassul* also affirm *istighātha*, as they explicitly include the phrase, “O Muḥammad, O Messenger of God, I turn to you before God.” This direct invocation highlights the practice of seeking help through the Prophet (s.a.w.) in a way that emphasises the role of the Prophet

³⁵ Muḥammad b. ‘Abdullāh al-Tabrīzī, *Mishkāt al-Maṣābiḥ* (al-Maktab al-Islāmī: 1979), 2495, book 9, *ḥadīth* 263.

(s.a.w.) as an intermediary.

A similar *ḥadīth* is reported from Imam al-Ṣādiq (a.s.), which includes the additional phrase:

يَا مُحَمَّدُ، يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، أَشْكُو إِلَى اللَّهِ وَإِلَيْكَ حَاجَتِي، وَإِلَى أَهْلِ بَيْتِكَ
الرَّاشِدِينَ حَاجَتِي، وَبِكُمْ أَتَوَجَّهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ فِي حَاجَتِي.

O Muḥammad, O Messenger of God, I complain to God and to you regarding my need, and to the rightly guided ones of your household regarding my need. Through you, I turn to God for the fulfilment of my need.³⁶

This narration highlights the close relationship between *tawassul* and *istighātha* whereby a believer makes an appeal to the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) and the *Ahl al-Bayt* (a.s.) and turns to God through them as well.

Furthermore, in a detailed narration outlining the etiquettes of *ziyāra*, Imam al-Ṣādiq (a.s.) recommends the following supplication be recited:

اللَّهُمَّ إِنَّكَ قُلْتَ: ﴿وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ إِذْ ظَلَمُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ جَاءُوكَ فَاسْتَغْفَرُوا اللَّهَ وَأَسْتَغْفَرَ
لَهُمُ الرَّسُولُ لَوَجَدُوا اللَّهَ تَوَّابًا رَحِيمًا﴾. وَإِنِّي أَتَيْتُ نَبِيَّكَ مُسْتَغْفِرًا تَائِبًا مِنْ
ذُنُوبِي، وَإِنِّي أَتَوَجَّهُ إِلَيْكَ بِنَبِيِّكَ نَبِيِّ الرَّحْمَةِ، مُحَمَّدٍ (ص). يَا مُحَمَّدُ، إِنِّي أَتَوَجَّهُ
إِلَى اللَّهِ رَبِّي وَرَبِّكَ بِكَ، لِيَعْفَرَ لِي ذُنُوبِي.

O God! You said, “Had they, when they wronged themselves, come to you and pleaded to God for forgiveness, and the Apostle had pleaded forgiveness for them, they would have surely found God Clement and Merciful (Q 4:64).” I have come to Your Prophet, repenting and asking for forgiveness for my sins, and I have turned to You through Your Prophet, the Prophet of Mercy, Muḥammad

³⁶ Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, 3: book 4, chapter 95, *ḥadīth* 1.

(s.a.w.). O Muḥammad! I have turned to God, Your Lord and mine, through you, so that He forgives my sins.³⁷

This supplication not only highlights *tawassul* by directly appealing to God through the Prophet (s.a.w.) but also affirms *istighātha* by emphasising the practice of pleading to the Prophet (s.a.w.) directly. The verse referenced within the narration (Q 4:64) also reinforces the concept of seeking divine mercy through the Prophet (s.a.w.)'s intercession, as explained earlier, demonstrating that these practices are deeply rooted in both the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*.

5.2.2 Sunnī

Similar to the Shī'i *ḥadīth* on *tawassul*, the second Sunnī *ḥadīth* quoted in section 5.1.2 also addresses *istighātha*. Additionally, the *ḥadīth* cited from Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī al-Andalusī in section 3.3 further reinforces the concept of *istighātha*.

5.3 *shafā'a*

5.3.1 Shī'a

In his book *al-Bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Abū l-Qāsim al-Khū'ī writes that the narrations reported from the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his successors (a.s.) on *shafā'a* reach the level of *tawātur*.³⁸

He then cites the following narration from al-Barqī on the authority of Mu'āwiya b. Wahb, who said:

I asked Abū 'Abdullāh (a.s.) [al-Ṣādiq] about the saying of God, "None shall speak except whom the All-beneficent permits and who says what is right (Q 78:38)." He said, "By God, we are the

³⁷ Ibn Qulawayh, *Kāmil al-Ziyārāt*, book 2, chapter 3, *ḥadīth* 1. Graded *Ṣaḥīḥ* by most Shī'i jurists.

³⁸ *Tawātur* refers to the transmission of a report by such a large number of narrators across successive generations that it would be inconceivable for them all to have colluded in fabricating it. Abū l-Qāsim al-Khū'ī, *al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Maktabat al-Imām al-Khū'ī al-Āmma: 2020),

ones permitted to speak in that situation, and we are the ones who say what is right.” I said, “May I be your ransom! What do you say when you speak?” He said, “We glorify our Lord, send blessings upon our Prophet, and intercede for our Shi‘a. [When we do this,] our Lord does not turn us away.”

This statement emphasises the key agents of intervention being the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his family.

Further, in his Supplication upon completing the reading of the Qur‘ān,³⁹ Imam Ali Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (a.s.), prays:

اللَّهُمَّ صَلِّ عَلَى مُحَمَّدٍ وَآلِ مُحَمَّدٍ، وَشَرِّفْ بُنْيَانَهُ، وَعَظِّمْ بُرْهَانَهُ، وَثَقِّلْ مِيزَانَهُ،
وَتَقَبَّلْ شَفَاعَتَهُ، وَقَرِّبْ وَسِيلَتَهُ.

O God, send blessings upon Muḥammad and the family of Muḥammad, honour his structure, magnify his proof, make his scale heavy, accept his intercession, and near his mediation.

This supplication reflects the deep connection between the Qur‘ān, the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his family, emphasising their role in intercession and seeking God’s acceptance of their mediating authority.

5.3.2 Sunnī

The *ḥadīth* from Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī al-Andalusī, cited in 3.3 and further referenced in 5.2.2, also points to *shafā‘a*. It states:

فَنُودِيَ مِنَ الْقَبْرِ: أَنَّهُ قَدْ غُفِرَ لَكَ.

Then there was a call from the grave that you have been forgiven.

This implies that the forgiveness was granted as a result of the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s intercession on behalf of the Arab man.

³⁹ Supplication 42 of *Ṣaḥīfa as-Sajjādiyya*.

Furthermore, Abū Hurayra 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ṣakhr al-Dawsī narrates from the Prophet (s.a.w.) that he said:

الشُّفَعَاءُ خَمْسَةٌ: الْقُرْآنُ، وَالرَّحْمُ، وَالْأَمَانَةُ، وَنَبِيِّكُمْ، وَأَهْلُ بَيْتِ نَبِيِّكُمْ.

Intervention is done by five: the Qur'ān, kinship, trust, your Prophet, and the family of your Prophet.⁴⁰

6. Theological Implications

The practices of *tawassul*, *istighātha* and *shafā'a* carry profound theological significance for both Twelver Shī'i Islam and the broader Muslim community. These practices address key themes such as the Oneness of God, access to Divine Mercy, spiritual hierarchy, and a believer's relationship with God and his chosen guides.

6.1 Twelver Shī'i Perspective

Tawassul, *istighātha*, and *shafā'a* reflect the Twelver Shī'i belief in God's ultimate authority and mercy, while affirming the unique spiritual status of the Prophet (s.a.w.) and the Imams (a.s.). They serve to strengthen a believer's connection with God through recognised intermediaries without compromising *tawḥīd*. Any invocation is understood as entirely dependent on God's will, safeguarding these practices from any association with *shirk*.⁴¹ These practices also affirm the guardianship of the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his vicegerents, recognising them as a means through which believers can access God's Divine Mercy, thereby strengthening their connection with them and adding an element of hope in God's Divine Mercy through them.

⁴⁰ Al-Muttaqī al-Hindī, *Kanz al-'Ummāl fi Sunan al-Aqwāl wa al-Af'āl* (Bayt al-Afkār al-Dawliya: 2005), 7:214.

⁴¹ *Shirk* refers to the act of associating partners with God, whether by attributing divine qualities to other beings or entities, or by worshipping anyone or anything other than God. It is considered the gravest sin in Islam, as it directly contradicts the core principle of *tawḥīd*, the oneness of God.

6.2 Sunnī Perspective

In Sunnī theology, *tawassul*, *istighātha* and *shafā'a* are generally considered permissible through the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.), but only under specific theological boundaries.⁴² They must explicitly affirm God's absolute oneness (*tawḥīd*) without attributing independent power to the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.).

However, the Salafi-Wahhabi school takes a more restrictive stance on *tawassul*, *istighātha*, and *shafā'a*. They argue that direct supplication to God without intermediaries is the only acceptable form of worship, citing verses such as:

﴿وَقَالَ رَبُّكُمْ ادْعُونِي أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ﴾

Your Lord has said, "Call Me and I will hear you!" (Q 40:60)

While *tawassul* through the Prophet (s.a.w.) during his lifetime is unanimously accepted, seeking intercession or aid from the Prophet (s.a.w.) or other revered personalities after their death is viewed as impermissible, as it is seen as *shirk*. *Istighātha* is rejected outright on the grounds that it implies reliance on entities other than God. Similarly, *shafā'a* is accepted only in the context of the Day of Judgment.⁴³

6.3 Summary

Both Shī'ī and Sunnī theology emphasise that *shafā'a* is a manifestation of God's mercy, granted solely by His will. Central to both perspectives is the principle of *tawḥīd*, where *tawassul*, *istighātha*, and *shafā'a* must always affirm God's ultimate authority and power. Any belief

⁴² Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya quotes this opinion from Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal in his book *Majmū' min al-fatāwā l-kubrā*, 5:72.

⁴³ Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya presents this opinion as his stance throughout his book *Qā'ida jalīla fi al-tawassul wa-l-wasīla* (al-Idārat al-Āmma li-l-Ṭab': 1999).

suggesting that intermediaries possess independent power or authority constitutes *shirk* and is unanimously rejected.

At the same time, these practices recognise a Divinely ordained spiritual hierarchy, where Prophets, Imams and revered personalities are viewed as chosen channels for Divine blessings and mercy. Their elevated status is not seen as a challenge to God's authority but as a testament to their proximity to Him and their role in aiding believers by His permission. This understanding bridges the theological gap between Divine Sovereignty and human agency, underscoring that all mediation and supplication ultimately return to God's Will.

7. Refutation of Common Misconceptions

To address common misconceptions about intermediaries, this section critically examines the arguments of scholars from the *Salafi* school, particularly Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya and Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb. Their critique focuses on *istighātha* and *shafā'a*, often viewing them as forms of *shirk*. Drawing from their writings and contemporary lectures, this analysis evaluates their claims through Qur'ānic, *ḥadīth* and theological lenses, comparing them with broader Islamic perspectives.

7.1 Argument 1: The Exclusivity of God in Responding to Supplications and the Role of Intermediaries

﴿لَهُ دَعْوَةُ الْحَقِّ وَالَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ لَا يَسْتَجِيبُونَ لَهُمْ بِشَيْءٍ﴾

Only to Him belongs the true invocation; and those whom they invoke besides Him do not answer them in any wise (Q 13:14).

Critics often cite this verse to make three key claims:

Firstly, they argue that only God responds to supplications, and any entities invoked besides Him—such as the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) or the Imams (a.s.)—have no power to answer.

Secondly, they contend that seeking help through intermediaries

resembles the actions of pre-Islamic idolaters, making it incompatible with monotheism (*tawhīd*).

Thirdly, they assert that even if one believes the Prophet (s.a.w.) or the Imams (a.s.) act only by God's permission, invoking them is still irrational, since God alone makes decisions—rendering intermediaries unnecessary.

7.1.1 Response

Invoking revered figures does not imply that they independently possess Divine power. Instead, it acknowledges their closeness to God and their role as intermediaries to seek His favour. This understanding aligns with the principle that while these figures are revered, it is ultimately God who remains the source of power and decision-making.

Moreover, the Shī'ī Twelver school draws a clear distinction between the concept of mediation and idolatry, as shown by the points in Table 3.

Furthermore, the word *dūn* (دُونُ), mentioned in the verse, is defined as “Other than, beside, or besides, exclusively of, or not as used before.”⁴⁴ This carries a sense of exclusivity, which may imply that invoking these figures suggests their power and ability are independent of God. If one were indeed to believe in their independent or exclusive power, this would constitute *shirk*. However, as previously established, these invocations are made with the understanding that any power possessed by these figures is entirely contingent on God's permission and will.

Additionally, historical examples, such as the sons of Prophet Ya'qūb (a.s.) asking him to seek forgiveness on their behalf (Q 12:97–98), support the legitimacy of seeking intermediation from revered personalities, even while affirming that God alone grants forgiveness.

⁴⁴ Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 939.

7.2 Argument 2: The Dead Cannot Intercede

Critics argue that intercession is limited to those still alive in the physical world. While they acknowledge Qur’ānic verses such as Q 2:154 and 3:169, which affirm that martyrs are alive, they maintain that this refers to a distinct mode of existence in *barzakh*,⁴⁵ not the worldly life. On this basis, they contend that martyrs cannot hear the living and thus cannot be invoked for intercession.

7.2.1 Response

Islamic traditions—across both Sunnī and Shī‘ī schools—affirm that the spiritual life of Prophets and martyrs enables them to hear the living and intercede on their behalf, due to their elevated status with God. This theological view draws upon Qur’ānic descriptions of the continued life of martyrs and is reinforced by the well-established tradition of visiting the graves of the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his family. The following analysis will examine this perspective through relevant Qur’ānic verses, authenticated *ḥadīths* and the insights of Shī‘ī scholars.

The Holy Qur’ān states:

﴿وَلَا تَقُولُوا لِمَنْ يُقْتَلُ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْوَاتٌ بَلْ أَحْيَاءٌ وَلَكِنْ لَا تَشْعُرُونَ﴾

Do not call those who were slain in God’s way “dead.” Rather, no, they are living, but you are not aware (Q 2:154).

﴿وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْوَاتًا بَلْ أَحْيَاءٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ يُرْزَقُونَ﴾

Do not suppose those who were slain in the way of God to be dead; no, they are living and provided for near their Lord (Q 3:169).

These verses highlight the elevated status of martyrs, suggesting

⁴⁵ *Barzakh* refers to the intermediate realm or state of existence in which souls dwell between death and the Day of Resurrection.

that their spiritual life grants them a unique position within the divine order. If interpreted merely as referring to their existence in *barzakh* and their reception of provision, this would not set them apart from others residing in the intermediate realm. However, the first verse specifically highlights the unseen life of martyrs, implying a unique form of connectedness to the worldly realm—one that transcends ordinary human comprehension.

Additionally, Islamic tradition—as conveyed by the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) and later narrated by the Imams of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (a.s.) and by ‘Ā’isha, the Prophet’s wife—affirms the ongoing connection between the living and the deceased, even when visiting the graves of ordinary believers.

‘Ā’isha narrates that the Prophet (s.a.w.) would visit the Baqī‘ cemetery in the last part of the night and would say:

السَّلَامُ عَلَيْكُمْ دَارَ قَوْمٍ مُؤْمِنِينَ، وَأَنَا كُمْ مَا تُوعَدُونَ، غَدًا مُؤَجَّلُونَ، وَإِنَّا إِن
شَاءَ اللَّهُ بِكُمْ لَآحِقُونَ، اللَّهُمَّ اغْفِرْ لِأَهْلِ بَقِيعِ الْعَرَقَدِ.

Peace be upon the abode of the community of believers.
What you were promised, arrived. Tomorrow will be our
prescribed term, and surely, we will join you, God willing.
O God, forgive the people of Baqī‘ al-Gharqad.⁴⁶

Similarly, Imam al-Ṣādiq (a.s.) advises us to visit graveyards and greet the deceased by saying:

السَّلَامُ عَلَى أَهْلِ الدِّيَارِ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمِينَ، أَنْتُمْ لَنَا فَرَطٌ، وَنَحْنُ - -
إِن شَاءَ اللَّهُ - - بِكُمْ لَآحِقُونَ.

Peace be upon the inhabitants of the dwellings from
among the believers and Muslims. You have preceded us,

⁴⁶ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* book 11, *ḥadīth* 131, *Sunnah.com*. Accessed 10th May 2025, <https://sunnah.com/muslim>.

and we, God willing, shall join you.⁴⁷

These greetings underscore the belief that even ordinary deceased believers remain aware of the greetings and prayers offered to them. This awareness naturally extends even more profoundly to those elevated in rank, such as the Prophet (s.a.w.) and the Imams (a.s.), who serve as the guardians of faith.

Multiple authentic narrations⁴⁸ from Imam al-Ṣādiq (a.s.) state:

أَمَّا إِنَّهُ يَسْمَعُكَ مِنْ قَرِيبٍ، وَيَبْلُغُهُ عَنْكَ إِذَا كُنْتَ نَائِيًا.

He [the Messenger of God (s.a.w.)] hears your voice [if you perform his *ziyāra*] from nearby and he will be informed of you [if you perform his *ziyāra*] from far.⁴⁹

The abundance of narrations affirming the spiritual life and sanctity of the Prophet (s.a.w.) and the Imams (a.s.) has led to the common practice of addressing them with reverence during shrine visits. Ibn rāhīm b. 'Alī al-Kaf'amī illustrates this devotional approach by recommending that visitors begin their salutation with the following acknowledgment:

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَعْتَقِدُ حُرْمَةَ صَاحِبِ هَذَا الْمَشْهَدِ الشَّرِيفِ فِي غَيْبِهِ كَمَا أَعْتَقِدُهَا
فِي حَضْرَتِهِ، وَأَعْلَمُ أَنَّ رَسُولَكَ وَخُلَفَاءَكَ (عَلَيْهِمُ السَّلَامُ) أَحْيَاءٌ عِنْدَكَ يُرْزَقُونَ،
يُرُونَ مَقَامِي، وَيَسْمَعُونَ كَلَامِي، وَيُرْذُونَ سَلَامِي.

O God, I believe in the sanctity of the owner of this holy shrine in his absence as I believe in it in his presence. I

⁴⁷ Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī. *Wasā'il al-Shī'a* (Mu'assasat Āl al-Bayt: 1993), 3, 225, *ḥadīth* 3470–3473.

⁴⁸ Authenticated in accordance with the methodology of Abū l-Qāsim al-Khū'i.

⁴⁹ Ibn Qūlawayh, *Kāmil al-Ziyārāt*, 2, chapter 2, *ḥadīth* 5 and 6; al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Wasā'il al-shī'a*, 14, 337.

also know for sure that Your Messenger and Your representatives (peace be upon them) are alive, finding their sustenance in Your presence; they can see my place, hear my words, and respond to my greetings.⁵⁰

This invocation affirms the continued sanctity of the Prophets and Imams even after their physical departure from this world, equating their spiritual presence with their temporal existence. It also asserts their ability to perceive and respond to the greetings of visitors, further emphasising their living connection with God and their followers.

Under this understanding, the recitation of salutations, blessings, and supplications at their graves acquires profound significance. If one were to believe that the Prophet (s.a.w.) or the Imams (a.s.) could neither hear nor respond, such acts would carry diminished spiritual value. In contrast, affirming their awareness and sanctity lends deeper meaning to these practices and underpins the longstanding tradition of visiting their shrines and seeking their intercession.

7.3 Argument 3: *Tawassul* and *Istighātha* Lack Clear Evidence

Critics contend that *tawassul* and *istighātha* lack explicit support in the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, suggesting that if these practices were truly divinely sanctioned, they would be explicitly mentioned in the Qur'ān.

7.3.1 Response

As demonstrated in Section 4 and 5, both the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* provide substantive foundations for *tawassul* and *istighātha*. The Qur'ān establishes a clear foundation for these practices, while numerous *ḥadīth* offer explicit illustrations of *tawassul* and *istighātha*. However, critics often attempt to interpret Qur'ān verses in a manner that ex-

⁵⁰ 'Abbās al-Qummī, *Mafātīḥ al-Jinān* (Maktabat al-Faqīh: 2004), section 3, chapter 2; and Ibrāhīm b. 'Alī al-Kaf'amī, *Miṣbāḥ junnat al-amān al-wāqiya wa jannat al-īmān al-bāqiya* (Mu'assasat al-Nu'mān: 1992), 554.

cludes these practices, seeking hidden meanings or alternative interpretations. Similarly, when encountering supporting *ḥadīths*, critics often scrutinise their chains of transmission with heightened scepticism. In other cases, they seek to limit the scope of the narrations by reinterpreting their context or confining them to specific historical circumstances, thereby undermining their significance or dismissing credible narrations.

8. Conclusion

The practices of *tawassul*, *istighātha* and *shafā‘a* are deeply rooted within Islamic theology and spirituality, particularly within the Twelver Shī‘ī perspective. A close examination of Qur’ān verses, *ḥadīth* literature and historical practices throughout different eras demonstrates that these forms of intermediation are not only permissible but also encouraged, provided they uphold the core principle of God’s absolute oneness and authority.

The Qur’ān affirms the legitimacy of *tawassul* and *shafā‘a*, outlining their conditions, while *ḥadīth* from both Sunnī and Shī‘ī sources offer further support.

Although critics—especially within the Salafi-Wahhabi school—reject these practices, their objections often arise from a misreading or selective interpretation of sources, rather than conclusive scriptural evidence. Crucially, unlike pre-Islamic idol worship, Islamic intermediation never attributes independent power to the intercessors; their role is always understood as contingent upon God’s will.

Far from contradicting monotheism, these practices deepen the believer’s relationship with God by fostering love for His chosen servants and reaffirming reliance on His mercy. As such, *tawassul*, *istighātha*, and *shafā‘a* remain legitimate expressions of devotion and avenues for spiritual proximity to the Divine.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr

Shaykh Mohammed Ali Ismail, whose insight, patience, and critical feedback significantly enhanced the quality of this work.

My heartfelt thanks also go to Shaykh Akeil Hassan and Sayyid Muhammad Qazwini for their generous support with proofreading, sentence refinement, and formatting suggestions—particularly during moments of difficulty.

I am also grateful to Hawza Online for providing a platform for advanced study and research in the Islamic sciences through its post-graduate-level Further Studies Programme, under which this article was written.

Finally, I wish to extend my deepest appreciation to my parents for their unwavering support, patience, and prayers, and for raising me with a deep love and reverence for the *Ahl al-Bayt* (a.s.).

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