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Brief History of Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) Life

His blessed name: 'Ali

His father's name: Imam Musa b. Ja'far (a.s.)

His mother's name: Najma or Tuktam

His nickname: Abu al-Hasan

His cognomen: Ridha

Date of birth: Dhu'l-Qanda 11, 148/Dec 29, 765

Place of birth: Holy city of Medina

Progeny: His holiness Imam Muhammad Taqi (a.s.); of course, it is disagreed whether his holiness has

had other children.

Rulers of his time: Mansur Dawaniqi, Mahdi 'Abbasi, Hadi 'Abbasi, Harun al-Rashid, Muhammad

Amin, Ma'mun 'Abbasi

Date of being appointed as heir apparent: Ramadhan, 201/March, 817, as imposed by Ma'mun

Length of life: 55

Date of martyrdom: the end of Safar, 203/September 5, 818

His murderer: Ma'mun 'Abbasi, through poisoning

His mausoleum: Holy city of Mashhad, as known worldwide. 1

Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) Date of Birth

Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) Noble Mother

His noble mother was an honorable lady named Najma or Tuktam, who was named Tahira – the pure one – after her marriage.4

She was a chaste5 and wise lady from among the Persian dignitaries.6

In a tradition, her highness Tuktam, Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) Mother, is quoted as saying: "Help me out by a wet nurse (to help me with suckling Ridha). She was asked: "Is the milk reduced?" "No," She answered, "but I have *adhkar* and supplications to perform that have been reduced after his birth."7

Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) Children

The historians and *hadith* scholars are divided over the number of Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) Children; many, like Shaykh al-Mufid8 and Ibn Shahrashub9, regard Imam al-Jawad (a.s.) as the only child of Imam al-Ridha (a.s.), but some have assumed him to have had other children, including a daughter named Fatima. 10

However, some traditions have confirmed the Imam's having had only one child. A man called Hannan b. Sudayr said, I said to Imam al-Ridha (a.s.): Would an Imam be without a son or a successor? His holiness answered: No, and know that there would be no more than one child for me, but God will grant him many children.11

The Auspicious Birth of Shams al-Shumus (the Radiant Sun among all the suns), 'Ali b. Musa al-Ridha (a.s.)

His holy mother, Lady Najma when pregnant with her son, 'Ali, said, "I did not feel any heaviness. When asleep, I heard *dhikr* of God from within me in a way that I was awe-inspired. After I gave birth to him, he placed his feet and hands on the ground and, raised his head to the sky, and moved his lips, as though he was saying something."

When his holiness, Imam Musa al-Kazim (a.s.) saw his son, he said, "O Najma! Blessed are you for the miraculous gift Allah granted you." Then, the baby was wrapped in a white piece of cloth and given to his holiness, who recited *adhan* into his right ear and *igama* into his left ear; he asked for some Euphrates

water and touched the baby's palate with it [for blessing], and said to his mother: "Take the baby as he is the remnant of Allah on His earth". 12

After the birth of Imam al-Ridha (a.s.), Imam al-Kazim (a.s.) gave her mother the nickname Tahira, meaning pure. 13

Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.), Wishing to See Imam al-Ridha (a.s.)

Hadhrat Musa b. Ja'far (a.s.) would say to his children: "This brother of yours, 'Ali b. Musa is the learned of the Prophet (S)'s household ['Alim-i Al-i Muhammad (S)]; ask him about your religion and learn by heart what he says. I frequently heard from my father, Ja'far b. Muhammad, who told me: "The learned of the Prophet (S)'s household is from among your progeny; I wish I would see him; he has the same name as Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali (a.s.).14

In numerous traditions related from the Holy Prophet (S), Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali (a.s.), and Imam al–Sadiq (a.s.) references have been made to the birth of that magnanimous Imam as well as his tragic martyrdom, his noble mausoleum in Khurasan, and the great reward for paying pilgrimage to him, which will be elaborated on in the chapter concerning his martyrdom.

Why was Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) Named al-Ridha?

Al-Bazanti, one of the dignitaries among the companions of Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) and Imam al-Jawad (a.s.) said, "I said to Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. 'Ali, Imam al-Jawad (a.s.): 'A group of your opponents presume that Ma'mun has given the cognomen al-Ridha to your father since he approved him as his heir apparent.'

Imam al–Jawad (a.s.) said, "By God, they are lying and committing a sin; rather, God, the Blessed and Exalted, named him as al–Ridha since he was approved by the Almighty and Glorious God in Heaven and endorsed by His Messenger and the Imams after him on earth."

"I asked: 'Were all your forefathers not so?' He said, 'Yes.' I asked: 'So, why your father from among them was named al-Ridha?' He answered: 'Since his opponents approved of him, as did his friends; and this did not happen to any of his forefathers. That is why he from among them was named Ridha."

Confirming this issue, Sulayman b. Hafs said, "Musa b. Ja'far named his son al-Ridha and (when he wanted to talk of him) he would say: 'Call my son al-Ridha; I said to my son al-Ridha; my son al-Ridha told me so and so…" 15

The Childhood and Adolescence Period of Imam al-Ridha (a.s.)

History has largely kept silent about the Imams (a.s.) in their childhood and adolescent period, as the

historians are more interested in the illustrious events and popular people, rather than the unpretentious people and those who are far from being boisterous and raucous, especially in relation to the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) who were intended by the state to be isolated; and the scholars of the time, out of their religious dissidence, tried to underestimate their role.

This has caused the latter generations to remain uninformed of the life of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) before their appointment to Imamate and most probably of the period after their Imamate.

Concerning what is related in history about how greatly his holiness al-Ridha (a.s.) was loved by his noble father, one of the companions of Imam Musa b. Ja'far (a.s.) named al-Mufadhdhal is quoted as saying: "I went to visit his holiness, I saw his son 'Ali was sitting on his lap; the Imam was kissing him and caressing his face, raising him up to his shoulder, and pressing him to his bosom and saying:

"May my father be your ransom! How sweet is your scent! How immaculate is your temperament and how evident your excellence!"

I said, "May I be your ransom! I feel such a love for this child that I have never felt for anyone else but you."

His holiness said, "O Mufadhdhal, he is to me like I am to my father; children,

some of whom are descendants of the others, and Allah is All-hearing, All-knowing. Qur®an: 3/34"

I asked: "Will he possess this position after you?" He said, "Yes, whoever obeys him will attain Truth, and whoever disobeys him will become an infidel." 16

And sometimes he would say: "My eldest son, 'Ali, is most of all others submissive and obedient to me. He looks upon *Jafr* and *Jami'a* (which are two significant source books of the Ahl al–Bayt [a.s.]'s knowledge) along with me, upon which no one but the Prophet and his successors would look."17

Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) Religious Authority in His Youth

In his youth, Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) enjoyed such an outstanding virtue and scholarship that people referred to him as a religious authority. Imam al-Kazim (a.s.) referred people to him, saying: "My son's writing is as my writing; his words are as my words, and his envoy is as my envoy; whatever he says is the very truth." 18

One day someone said to Imam al-Kazim (a.s.): "I have a question." His holiness said, "Ask it from your Imam." The man asked: "Who do you mean? I know no Imam except you!" His holiness said, "That is my son, 'Ali, I have given my nickname – Abu al-Hasan – to him!" 19

Ibn Hajar, a Sunni scholar, said, "Hadhrat Ridha (a.s.), when only twenty and some years old, would

give fatwa (legal judgments) in the Mosque of Rasul Allah (S)."

Dhahabi, another Sunni scholars said, "Hadhrat Ridha (a.s.) would give fatwa in his youth during the lifetime of Malik b. Anas – one of the four Sunni jurists."20

Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) High Status in the Divine Presence

Imam al–Jawad (a.s.) said, "One of the companions of Imam al–Ridha (a.s.) fell sick (lying in his deathbed). His holiness (a.s.) went to visit him and asked him how he was. The man answered he was desperately ill, and that he saw death before his eyes.

The Imam said, 'How did you see death?' He said, 'Very hard and painful.' The Imam went on to say: 'It is the beginning; it [death] has shown you some of its modes. People are of two groups: for one group dying will be a comfort and for the other [when they die] people will be comforted. Renew your faith in God and *wilaya* (profession of faith in God and His Messenger and devotion to Imams), so that you will be comforted."

"The man did so, and then said, 'O son of Rasul Allah (S), now my Lord's angels are saluting you with their greetings and blessings and are standing before you, waiting for your permission to be seated."

His holiness said, "O angels of the Lord be seated!" "Then the Imam said to the man: 'Ask the angels if they are ordered to be standing before me?"

"The ailing man asked them and they answered: 'If all the God's angels are in your presence they would stand before you out of your respect and would not be seated until you permit them to sit; God has ordained them so."

"Then as the ailing man kept his eyes closed said, 'Pease be upon you, O Divine envoy! It is you who are present to me along with the Holy Messenger (S) and other Imams (a.s.).' And thus he left his body."21

My Son in a Strange Land

Shaykh Saduq (*ra*) relates that a man from among the pious saw the Prophet (S) in a dream and asked him: "O Rasul Allah! Which of your [grand] sons should I visit?" His holiness answered: "Some of my sons come to me poisoned and some killed." I said, "With such dispersion of their [burial] places, which one should I visit?"

His holiness said, "The one who is nearest to you and is buried in a strange land." I asked: "Do you mean al-Ridha?" The Prophet (S) said, "Say sallallahu 'alayh (may God bless him), Say sallallahu 'alayh, Say sallallahu 'alayh!" 22

Devotional Sira of Imam al-Ridha (a.s.)

Attending to worship and allocating time to devotional acts and special litanies and supplications during the day and night has been one of the Ahl al-Bayt's (a.s.) regular practices, which, despite people's visiting them and their teaching and various other preoccupations, they have never neglected, and this is a great lesson for their followers.

Now, part of the Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) devotional attitude is introduced as follows:

He would prostrate after his morning prayers and stay in prostration until sunrise.

When he found a chance and had free time, he would perform a thousand *rak* as of prayers.

After every prayer he would perform a thanksgiving prostration.

He was so intimate with the Qur'an that all his sayings and replies and examples were of a Qur'anic nature.

Every three days he would complete the recitation of the whole Qur'an and say: if I wish I would complete it in less than this, but each *aya* I recite I deliberate on it to see where and when it was revealed.

He slept little during night and would keep vigil most of the nights.

He would fast a lot, never neglecting the three-days-a-month fasting.

He would recite *salawat* (benediction to the Holy Prophet) in his supplications and would recite it a lot in his prayers and at other times.

He would recite the Qur'an in bed at night and when he came to the verses concerning the Paradise and Hell, he would weep a lot.

All the time he was engaged in remembrance of God and most of all he stood in awe of his Lord 23

Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) Devotional Schedule in his Journey to Khurasan

Raja' b. Abi sahhak was an administrator of the Abbasid government, who presided over the high council of tax-collection during the reign of Ma'mun. 24 Having been appointed to take Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) to Ma'mun from Medina to Marv and making sure to choose a route through Basra, Ahwaz, and Fars, rather than through Qum, he said, "I accompanied his holiness from Medina to Marv and I swear by God that I did not see at any time no one like him in piety, excessive remembrance of God, and so awe-inspired by God. He had the habit to keep sitting on his praying place after the Morning Prayer and engage in *dhikr* of *Subhan Allah*, *Allahandulillah*, *Allahu Akbar*, *La ilaha illa Allah*, and reciting *salawat* to

the Holy Prophet and his progeny until the sunrise; then he would prostrate himself and remain in prostration well through the daylight.

Then, he would raise his head and talk to people and preached to them. Near noon, he would perform ablution again and return to his praying place, recite *adhan* and *iqama*, and perform his noon prayer after performing eight supererogatory *rak'as* prior to noon prayer – in a special procedure as quoted in the *hadith*.

After prayer, he would recite *tasbih* (*Subhan Allah* = Glorious is Allah), *tahmid* (*alhamdulillah* = Praise be to Allah), *takbir* (*Allahu Akbar* = Allah is the greatest), and *tahlil* (*la ilaha ill Allah* = There is no deity but Allah) for a while and then he would go on prostration and recite *hamdan lillah* (praise be to Allah) one hundred times.

After the sunset, he would perform *wudhu* (partial ablution), say *adhan* and *iqama*, and perform the evening prayer; after that he would recite *tasbih*, *tahmid*, *takbir*, and *tahlil* for a time.

He would then perform a thanksgiving prostration and after that and without talking to anyone he would perform four supererogatory *rak* as after evening prayer along with two final *salams* (face turned right and then left) and two *qunuts* (a prayer said after the second *rak* a with hands raised).

Following that, he would engage in after-prayer-supplications (ta'qibat) for a while and then break his fast. 25 Almost one third through the evening, he would stand up and perform his bed-time ('isha'') prayer, then while sitting in his place of prayer, he would say dhikr (remembrance of Allah) and recite hamd and la ilaha ill Allah for a while and after performing ta'qibat and thanksgiving prostration, he would go to bed.

Toward the last one-third of the night, he would get out of his bed while reciting *tasbih*, *tahmid*, *takbir*, *tahlil*, and *istighfar* (asking for God's pardon), brush his teeth, perform *wudhu*, and perform eleven *rak'as* of late-night supererogatory prayer (*salat al-layl*) – in a special procedure as related in the *hadith* – and after prayer, he would keep sitting to say *ta'qibat* and near dawn he would perform two *rak'as* of dawn supererogatory prayer.

At dawn break, he would say *adhan* (the call to prayer) and *iqama* (the declaration of standing for prayer). After performing the final *Salam* (or *taslim*), he would say *ta'qibat*; then, he would perform two thanksgiving prostrations till daybreak.

In any city where he made an intention to stay for ten days he would fast during daytime and when night fell, he would say prayers before breaking his fast; and if he did not intend to stay, he would perform the obligatory prayers in two *rak'as*, except for the evening prayer (which is three *rak'as*).

He would never fail to perform the evening supererogatory, late-night supererogatory, and the two *rak* as of dawn prayer, neither while travelling nor when staying at home. However, he would give up the

daytime – noon and afternoon – supererogatory prayers while on a trip and after any shortened (travel) prayer (*salat al-qasr*), he would say thirty times the four *tasbihats* (*subhan Allah-i, wa al-hhamduli'Alla-hi, wa la ilaha ill'Allahu, wa Allahu akbar,*), and would say: "This is for the completion of *salat*...

On a trip, he would never fast; and in his invocations, he would always recite *salawat* to the Prophet and his progeny, repeating this *salawat* during and after his prayers a lot.

At night while in bed, he would read the Qur'an a lot and whenever he reached a verse in the Qur'an in which Paradise of Hell-fire was mentioned, he would weep and ask Allah for the Paradise and take refuge in Him from the Hell-fire.

In all his prayers, his holiness would recite the *bismi'Allah* (the formula *bi'smillah al-rahmanlal-rahim* [= in the name of Allah; the most Merciful, the most Compassionate]) in a loud voice.

In any city he entered the people would go to him and ask him about the principal features of their religion and his holiness would answer them, quoting many traditions from Imam 'Ali (a.s.) and the Apostle of Allah (S) as related through his forefathers.

When I took the Imam (a.s.) to Ma'mun and he asked me for his travel report, I recounted his holiness' states to him, he said, 'That is true, o son of Abi hahk; 'Ali b. Musa is the best among the people of the earth and the most learned and the most devoted among them. Do not tell anyone what you have seen of him because I want his excellences be told in my own words. 26 And I seek for the help of Allah in my intention to uplift his value."27

Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) On-Time Prayers

Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) gave great importance to on-time prayer, as it is the secret of consciousness and religiosity and a Muslim's devotion to Allah and spiritual matters; and those who are committed to on-time prayer are usually noble and prominent in faith and spirituality.

In a meeting 'Umran Sabi, the renowned scholar of the time, was talking with Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) and their discourse had reached a sensitive point when all of a sudden the Imam (a.s.), stood up and said to Ma'min – who was watching the debate – that it was time for prayer.

'Umran said, "My heart is softened (for accepting Islam), do not interrupt my answer." The Imam (a.s.) said, "We will say prayer and come back." 28

In another *hadith*, Ibrahim b. Musa says: "I asked something from Imam al–Ridha (a.s.) and he promised to fulfill. Then, one day his holiness set out to visit some of the 'Alawis. On the way, the time for prayer came; his holiness dismounted the beast and we were alone. He told me to call to prayer (chant the *adhan*).

I said, 'Let's wait for the companions to join us.' He said, 'May God bless you with His forgiveness, do

not postpone prayer from its due time to a later time for no reason; always perform your prayer on time.' I chanted the *adhan* and we performed our prayer. After prayer I said to him: 'O son of the Prophet! Some time has passed since you made a promise to me and I am needy.

You are always busy and I rarely have access to you.' At this time, Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) touched the ground and picked a gold ingot and said, 'Take this! May God bless you, use it and conceal what you just saw."

The man said, "That property was so bountiful that I purchased an equivalent of seventy thousand dinars worth of goods and I became the most enriched person in Khurasan."29

- 1. Adopted from Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 49, p. 2. Of course, concerning the birth and martyrdom of his holiness other views have also been reported.
- 2. I'lam al-Wara, 302; Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 49, p. 3.
- 3. 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.), vol. 1, p. 18; Muruj al-Dhahab, 3/441, Isbat al-Wasiyya, 182.
- 4. 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.), vol. 1, p. 15.
- 5. 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.), vol. 1, p. 17.
- 6. Ihqaq al-Haqq, 12/343 from Yanabi' al-Mawadda.
- 7. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 49, p. 2.
- 8. Al-Irshad, vol. 2, p. 263.
- 9. Managib, vol. 4, p. 376.
- 10. Muntaha al-Amal, vol. 2, p. 352.
- 11. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 49, p. 221.
- 12. 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.), vol. 2, p. 250.
- 13. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 49, p. 7.
- 14. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 49, p. 100 from I'lam al-Wara.
- 15. 'Ilal al-Sharayi', vol. 1, p. 226.
- 16. 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.), vol. 1, p. 26.
- 17. Basa'ir al-Darajat, part 3, chapter 14, vol.24, p.20.
- 18. Usul al-Kafi, 1/312; 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.), 1/31; Al-Irshad, 2/250.
- 19. Tahdhib al-Tahdhib, 7/339.
- 20. Siyar A'lam al-Nubala, 9/388.
- 21. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 49, p. 72, as claimed by Rawandi.
- 22. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 49, p. 72, quoted from 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.).
- 23. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 49, p. 90-94, collected from among various ahadith.
- 24. Lughatnama-yi Dihkhuda, 23/286.
- 25. On a trip, he would never fast, but in any city where he made an intention to stay for ten days he would fast during daytime. Editor
- 26. Which is of course a cover-up to conceal his excellences.
- 27. 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.), vol. 2, p. 178.
- 28. 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.), vol. 1, p. 139.
- 29. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 49, p. 49; Usul al-Kafi, vol. 1, p. 406, somewhat different and brief.

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