

Chapter 1: Origins of Shi'i Islam

[The meaning of the term Shi'a](#)

In Arabic, the term “Shi’ah” originally means one, two or a group of followers. In the Glorious Qur’an, this term is used several times in this sense. For example, in the verse (28: 15) God speaks of one of the followers of Moses as one of his Shi’a. Elsewhere, Abraham is introduced as a Shi’a of Noah (37:83).

In the beginning of the history of Islam, the term “Shi’a” was used in its original or literal sense for followers of different people. For example, some hadiths speak of the Shi’a of Ali b. Abi Talib and others of the Shi’a of Mu’awiyah b. Abi Sufyan. However, gradually the term acquired a secondary or technical meaning, i.e. the followers of Ali, those who believed in his Imamate (divine leadership).

Shahrestani (d. 548 A.H) in his *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, an outstanding source about different sects in Islam, writes, " Shi’a are those who followed Ali in particular and believed in his Imamate and caliphate according to the explicit teachings and will of the Prophet Muhammad."¹

This is a very accurate definition, since the Shi’a themselves believe that the reason for following Ali is that it was required by the Prophet and it was not their personal decision to choose whom to follow, unlike the non-Shi’a who, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, followed the one who was chosen at Saqifah and believed that the Prophet had left it to the people themselves to decide whom to follow.

Of course, Abu Bakr b. Abi Quhafah, the first Caliph, who himself was chosen in this way, believed that he must appoint his successor. And the second Caliph, ‘Umar b. Khattab, in turn appointed a council of six people to choose one amongst themselves according to a very strict procedure set up by him. It is interesting to note that it was Ali, the fourth Caliph, who was chosen and indeed forced by nearly all Muslims after the murder of the third Caliph, ‘Uthman b. ‘Affan, to undertake the position of caliphate.

In his *Firaq al-Shi’ah*, al-Hasan b. Musa al-Nawbakhti (d. 313 A.H), a well-known Shi’a scholar, writes, “the Shi’a are the party of Ali b. Abi Talib. They were called ‘ Shi’a’ of Ali during and after the life of the Prophet and are known as the followers of Ali and believers in his Imamate”.²

Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413 A.H), one of the most outstanding early Shi'a scholars, defines the Shi'a as being those who follow Ali and believe in his immediate successorship to the Prophet. [3](#) Explaining why Shi'a are also called "Imamiyah", he says: "This is a title for those who believe in the necessity of Imamate and its continuity in all ages, and that every Imam must be explicitly designated, and must also be infallible and perfect."[4](#)

Thus, it can be said that Shi'a Muslims are those who have the following beliefs about the successorship to the Prophet Muhammad:

- a. Successorship to the Prophet is a Divine position.
- b. As the Prophet was chosen by God, his successor or Imam also must be chosen by God and then made known by the Prophet.
- c. The immediate successor to the Prophet Muhammad was Ali.

When did Shi'ism start?

Naturally the question arises as to when Shi'ism started. There are many hadiths narrated by both Shi'a and non-Shi'a regarding the issue of Imamate that will be studied later when discussing Shi'i doctrines. In what follows, however, we will just study some hadiths in which the Prophet Muhammad spoke of a group of people as "Shi'a" (followers) of Ali and then refer to some extra reasons from hadiths and the history of Islam that can shed more light on the subject at hand.

All hadiths mentioned below are cited from respected Sunni sources. These are, however, a few of the most important narrations, and there are many more to be found in the sources mentioned here as well as others.

(1) Ibn 'Asakir (d. 571 A.H.) narrated from Jabir b. 'Abdullah al-Ansari that he said:

Once we were with the Prophet Muhammad, when Ali arrived, upon which the Prophet said, 'I swear by Him who has my life in His hand that surely this man and his Shi'a will be happy on the Day of Resurrection and then the verse "***Surely those who believe and do good deeds are the best of men***" (98:7) was revealed. Later, whenever the companions of the Prophet Muhammad saw Ali coming, they would say, "The best of men has come".[5](#)

(2) Ibn Hajar (d. 974) narrated from Ibn Abbas that when the verse (98:7) was revealed the Prophet told Ali: "Those are you and your Shi'a. You and your Shi'a will come on the day of Resurrection while you will be pleased and well pleasing (to God) and your enemies will come while they will be angry and seized by their necks". (Ibn Hajar, Section 11, Chapter 1, the Verse 11)[6](#)

(3) Ibn al-Athir (d. 606) narrated that, addressing Ali, the Prophet said:

"O Ali! You and your Shi'a will reach God being pleased with Him and well pleasing Him, and your enemies will reach Him, being angry and will be seized by their necks". Then the Prophet demonstrated how this would be by putting his hand on his neck. (Ibn al-Athir, Al-Nihayah, the entry "qa-ma-ha")

There are other hadiths in which the Prophet Muhammad, addressing Ali, used the expression "our Shi'a". This is in line with what was asserted above that the Shi'a are those who follow Ali, in accordance with the teachings of the Prophet and not because of their own personal decision. For example, Ibn 'Asakir narrated that the Prophet said:

"Surely there is a spring in Paradise sweeter than nectar, smoother than butter, cooler than ice, and smells better than musk. In that spring is the clay (tinah) from which we (my household and me) were created and our Shi'a are made from the same clay."[7](#)

There are yet other hadiths in which the Prophet, addressing Ali, used the expression " Shi'a of your descendants". This confirms what was suggested above, that the Shi'a are those who follow Ali because they believe in the institution of Imamate. As we will see in detail later, the Shi'a believe that Ali was the first Imam and after him the institution of Imamate continued in those offspring of Ali and Fatimah that were chosen by God and introduced by the Prophet.

For example, Zamakhshari (d. 528 A.H.) in his Rabi' al-Abrar reports that the Prophet said: "O Ali! When the Day of Resurrection comes I will hold on to God, you will hold on to me, your descendants will hold on to you and their Shi'a will hold on to them. Then you will see where we will be taken."[8](#)

It has to be noted that according to the Qur'an, prophethood was also inherited. The Qur'an says:

"And surely we have sent Noah and Abraham, and we put prophethood and the Book in their offspring". (57:26)

This means that those who were qualified to be chosen as prophets by God were included in their offspring.

In addition to the above-mentioned hadiths and their like, and those hadiths on Imamate that will be mentioned later, there are many other reasons that make the appearance of a group of people such as the Shi'a in the lifetime of the Prophet a very natural and even necessary phenomenon.

For example, at the beginning of Islam when the Prophet was asked by God to start his public invitation to Islam by inviting his close relatives, he invited his relatives to a meal. After the meal the Prophet expressed his mission and invited the guests to Islam and said that whoever believed in Islam among them and assisted him would be his successor. All kept silent. The only one who accepted the invitation to assist him was Ali, a teenager at that time.

The Prophet asked him to sit and repeated his invitation for the second and the third time. Again and again it was just Ali who expressed his readiness to support the Prophet. The Prophet accepted Ali's

submission to the will of God and carried out Allah's command to designate him as his successor. This event is documented in many sources.[9](#)

In a very important statement, the Prophet clearly affirmed that Ali was truthful and free of false beliefs and wrong acts, be it in his personal conduct or in his speech and judgements, and implicitly asked Muslims to follow him. Umm Salamah reported that the Prophet said: "Ali is always with the truth (al-haqq) and the Qur'an and the truth are always with him, and until the Day of Resurrection they will never separate from each other".

This particular hadith is narrated by Ibn 'Abbas, Abu Bakr, 'A'ishah, Abu Sa'id al-Khuddari, Abu Layla, and Abu Ayyub al-Ansari as well. [10](#) The Prophet is also quoted as saying, "May God bless Ali. My Lord, make the truth always be with him". [11](#)

The Prophet also asserted on several occasions that Ali was the most knowledgeable among his men in matters pertaining to Islamic sciences. For example, the Prophet said: "Wisdom is divided into ten parts: nine parts are given to Ali and one part is distributed among the rest of the people". [12](#) Later the second Caliph reaffirmed the sayings of the Prophet by saying, "May God never afflict me with a difficult task where Ali is not present". [13](#)

One also has to take into account the valuable and vital services and sacrifices of Ali, in order to be able to realise his position among Muslims. For example, when the infidels of Mecca planned to kill the Prophet and God informed him of their plot, the Prophet asked Ali whether he would be willing to sleep in his place so that the pagans would think that he is still at home, allowing him to safely leave Mecca. Ali accepted this task, on the occasion of which the verse was revealed, ***"And among people are those who sell their souls to acquire Divine pleasure"***.

The emigration of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina marks the beginning of the Islamic Calendar. Ali served the cause of Islam by fighting in the Battles of Badr, Uhud, Khaybar, Khandaq and Hunayn, in which he played crucial roles. These are all registered in numerous historical works and collections of hadiths by non-Shi'a scholars.

As was mentioned earlier, the Prophetic hadiths on the issue of the Imamate in general, and about Ali in particular, will be studied later. However, I would like to conclude the discussion here by referring to the well-known hadith of Ghadir Khumm. Returning from his last pilgrimage to Mecca, the Prophet asked thousands of Muslims accompanying him to stop on the way.

He stood on a platform or pulpit made for him out of saddles and said, "Whoever has adopted me as his master (mawla), Ali now is his master". Then the people present there, including the first and second Caliphs to be paid allegiance to Ali and congratulated him. This hadith is transmitted by more than one hundred sources.

For a comprehensive list of non-Shi'a sources of this hadith, see 'Abaqat al-Anwar by Mir Hamid Husayn al-Hindi (d. 1306 A.H.) and Al-Ghadir by 'Abd al-Husayn al-Amini (d. 1390 A.H.). Having

affirmed the veracity of the hadith, some Sunni writers have interpreted the term mawla, used in this hadith in another way.

According to them, the term mawla here is used in the sense of friendship. Whether this can be accepted or not, there is no doubt that this tradition and the event gave Ali a unique and central position among the Companions of the Prophet.

Thus, it seems that the different sets of hadiths along with the historical evidence mentioned above leave no doubt that during the lifetime of the Prophet many Muslims came to love Ali deeply and sought his company and were determined to follow him after the Prophet. These people were so frequently and significantly referred to as Shi'a of Ali that gradually the term "Shi'a" alone became equivalent to the Shi'a of Ali.

More important than this is the fact that the idea of the Imamate of Ali certainly started in the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. The demise of the Prophet naturally brought the issue into focus and distinguished those who still believed in the necessity of following Ali from other Muslims, who sooner or later came to believe in the institution of the caliphate as the successorship to the Prophet in ruling the Islamic society, and not as a Divine position.

Describing events after the death of the prophet, Al-Mas'udi (d. 345 A.H), a great Sunni historian, writes: "Surely Imam Ali and those of his Shi'a who were with him stayed in his house at the time that the allegiance to Abu Bakr was made."[14](#)

Later certain events, such as the wars that occurred during the Caliphate of Ali and the event of Karbal, in which Husayn, the third imam of the Shi'a and 72 people of his family and companions were killed, made the Shi'a of Ali more recognised and defined Shi'a identity more sharply.

For example, we find in one of the early works that Ali, condemning Talhah and Zubayr, said: "Surely the followers of Talhah and Zubayr in Basra killed my Shi'a and my agents".[15](#) Ab° Mikhnaf (d. 158 A.H) reports that after the death of Mu'awiyah the Shi'a gathered at the house of Sulayman b. Surad and he told them: "Mu'awiyah has died and Husayn has refused to pay allegiance to the Umayyads and has departed towards Mecca and you are his Shi'a and the Shi'a of his father".[16](#)

Early Shi'a

Naturally Shi'a Islam first started in the Hijaz amongst the companions of the Prophet. Reference to the Islamic historical and biographical works shows that the list of the Shi'a among the companions of the Prophet includes the following well-known bani Hashim (offspring of Hashim, great-grand father of the Prophet Muhammad): 'Abdullah b. al-'Abbas, al-Fadl b. al-'Abbas, 'Ubaydillah b. al-'Abbas, Qiththam b. al-'Abbas, 'Abd al-Rahman b. al-'Abbas, Tamam b. al-'Abbas, Aqil b. Abi Talib, Abu Sufyan b. al-Harth b. 'Abd al-Mutallib, Naufil b. al-Harth, 'Abdullah b. Ja'far b. Abi Talib, 'Awn b. Ja'far, Muhammad

b. Ja'far, Rabi'at b. al-Harth b. 'Abd al-Mutallib, al-Tufayl b. al-Harth, al-Mughayrat b. Nawfil b. al-Harith, 'Abdullah b. al-Harth b. Nawfil, 'Abdullah b. Abi Sufyan b. al-Harth, al-'Abbas b. Rabi'at b. al-Harth, al-'Abbas b. 'Utbah b. Abi Lahab, 'Abd al-Mutallib b. Rabi'at b. al-Harth, Ja'far b. Abi Sufyan b. al-Harth.

The list of Shi'a among those companions of the Prophet who were not bani Hashim includes: Salman, Miqdad, Abu Dharr, 'Ammar b. Yasir, Hudhayfah b. al-Yaman, Khuzaymah b. Thabit, Abu Ayyub al-Ansari, Abu al-Haytham Malik b. al-Tihan, Ubayy b. Ka'b, Qays b. Sa'd b. 'Ubadah, 'Adiy b. Hatam, 'Ubadah b. al-Samit, Bilal al-Habashi, Abu Rafi', Hashim b. 'Utbah, 'Uthman b. Hunayf, Sahl b. Hunayf, Hakim b. Jibillah al-'Abdi, Khalid b. Sa'id b. al-'Aas, Ibn Husayb al-Aslami, Hind b. Abi Halah al-Tamimi, Ju'dah b. Hubayrah, Hujr b. 'Adiy al-Kindi, 'Amr b. al-Hamq al-Khuza'i, Jabir b. 'Abdullah al-Ansari, Muhammad b. Abi Bakr (the son of the first Caliph), Aban b. Sa'id b. al-'Asi, Zayd b. Sauhan. [17](#)

[1.](#) Shahres tani, Vol. 1, p. 146

[2.](#) Al-Nawbakhti, p. 17.

[3.](#) See al-Mufid, p. 36.

[4.](#) Ibid, p. 38.

[5.](#) Ibn 'Asakir, Vol. 2, p. 442 & al-Suyuti, Vol. 6, p. 5890

[6.](#) In the same book, Ibn Hajar has also narrated from Umm Salamah that one night when the Prophet was in her house, his daughter Fatimah arrived, with Ali following her. Then the Prophet said: .O Ali! You and your companions are in Heaven. You and your Shi'a are in Heaven..

[7.](#) Ibn 'Asakir, Vol. 1, p. 129, No. 180

[8.](#) Cited in S ubhani, Vol, 6, p. 104.

[9.](#) Among non-Shi'a sources , one can refer to Tarikh al-Umam wa al-Muluk by Tabari (d. 310 A.H.), Vol. 3, pp. 62, 63; Al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh by Ibn al-Athir (d. 630 A.H.), Vol. 2, pp. 40, 41 & Musnad by Ahmad b. Hanabal, Musnad al-'Asharah al-Mubashshar in bi al-Jannah, Sakhr serial no. 841.

[10.](#) According to Ghafari, p. 10, this tradition has been transmitted through 15 non-Shi'a channels, such as Mustadrik al-Hakim al-Nishaburi, al-Sawa'iq by Ibn Hajar, Kanz al-'Ummal and Yanabi' al-Mawaddah.

[11.](#) See, e.g. al-Tirmidhi, Kitab al-Manaqib, Sakhr serial no. 3647.

[12.](#) Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah by Ibn Kathir (d. 774 A. H.), Vol. 7, p. 359.

[13.](#) See for example Al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah by Ibn Hajar, Vol. 2, p. 509 and Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah by Ibn Kathir, Vol. 7, p. 36.

[14.](#) Ithbat al-Wasayah, p. 121.

[15.](#) Waq'at Saffin by Nasr b. Muzahim (d. 212 A.H.).

[16.](#) Maqtal al-Imam al-Husayn by Abu Mikhnaf, p. 15.

[17.](#) For example, see Buhuth fi al-Milal wa al-Nihal by J. Subhani, Vol. 6, pp. 109 & 110. Sayyid Ali al-Madani (d. 1120 A.H.) in his Al-Darjat al-Rafi'at fi Tabaqat al-Shi'ah al-Imamiyah mentions names of 69 Companions of the Prophet who were Shi'a. Sayyid 'Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din (1377 A.H.) in his Al-Fusul al-Muhimma fi Ta'rif al-Ummah mentions names of more than two hundred Companions of the Prophet Muhammad who were Shi'a in an A-Z order starting with Abu Rafi' and ending with Yazid b. Hautharah al-Ansari. Yousof b. 'Abdullah (d. 456) in his Al-Is'ti'ab, Ibn al-Athir in his Usd al-Ghabah and Ibn Hajar (d. 852 A.H.) in his Al-Isabah are some of the non-Shi'a scholars who have mentioned some of the Shi'a pioneers.