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## Chapter 9: The Immate: The Esoteric Inheritance or the Bitin of the Prophet

To sum up the political aspects of Islemic history, it is clear that the Caliphate is transmitted by way of nass through which the Prophet or the Imem designates who will succeed him in the Imemate. 1The Imem is the sole expert of the inner sense of the Scripture and the Sunnah. This exclusive knowledge was passed directly from the Prophet to 'Ale and through him to his descendants. 2The Imem is thus the definitive authority on religion obligations [weijibet/fured] and the esoteric interpretation [tafser/ta/wei/] of the share 'ah [Islemic law]. Furthermore, the Imem possesses the quality of 'ismah, infallibility and impeccability.3

The controversial and contentious issue of the succession of the Prophet, disputed by Sunnis and Sh®ites for over a millennium, can never be understood if the essentially esoteric function of the Im®mate, as a prolongation and complement to the Prophethood, is overlooked. The issue of the Im®mate is more than an abstract question. It is the legitimate expression of Muhammadan spiritual authority and temporal power.

It is a concrete existential reality which needed to manifest itself in the world to continue expounding the  $b \pm tin$  [esoteric aspect] of the Prophethood.

For Shelites, the completion of the "Cycle of Prophethood" [delirat al-nubuwwah] marks the beginning of the "Cycle of Initiation" [delirat al-wileyah]. For metaphysical and cosmological reasons, the Cycle of wileyah was to be opened through its own "door" [al-beb], 'Ale ibn Abe Telib, due to his role as "spiritual successor" [khalefah rehene] and "executer" [wase] of the Prophet's betin [secrets] or initiator into the Muhammadan mysteries.

This is why the Imemate is not merely a question of blood ties to the Prophet. 4 The issue is not the degree of relation with him, be it wives, daughters, grandchildren, sons-in-law or parents-in-law. On the contrary, the worldly family union is the result of the pleromatic unity of the *nubuwwah* [Prophethood] and the *wileyah* [guardianship].

As Corbin senses, the concept of the Im®ms can only be understood if one considers them as divine luminaries and pre-cosmic entities. 5They themselves affirmed so during the course of their worldly existence. Many traditions to this effect were gathered by al-Kulayn® in his voluminous compilation al-K®f®.6

They stress the fact that the Prophet and the Im®m are from the same essence and the same light7 and what is said of one is applicable to any one of the twelve.8

She ite gnosis enables us to understand the importance of the situation and exactly what was on the line with the Caliphate. By the political substitution of Abe Bakr for 'Ale, the organic link between the zehir [exoteric] and the betin [esoteric] was temporarily broken. In Sunnism, this led to the development of a legalistic religion, based on a purely juristic interpretation of Islem. 10 It was thus left to Sefe and She ite Islem to preserve, in their exoteric practices and doctrines, the lost esoteric equilibrium.

- 1. Editor's Note: The nass or appointment of 'All and the succeeding Imlms is one of the issues stressed by Shaykh Mufld in Kitlb al-irshld.
- 2. Editor's Note: As Im®m al-S®diq explains, "Al® was a man of knowledge, and knowledge is inherited. And a man of knowledge never dies unless another one remains after him who knows his knowledge" (al-K®f®, 156: had®th 590). Im®m al-Rid® wrote in a letter that "Muhammad was All®h's custodian over His creatures. When he was taken, we, the Household, were his inheritors" (160, had®th 598).
- 3. Editor's Note: 'Ismah may also be translated as "a state of sinlessness."
- 4. Editor's Note: There can be no monarchy in Islīm as can be seen in Imīm Khumaynīs's "The Incompatibility of Monarchy with Islīm," Islīm and Revolution (Berkely: Mizan P, 1981): 200–208. The Imīmate was given to those appointed by Allīh, and was not necessarily from father to eldest son. As Imīm al–Sīdiq explains "Do you think that he who appoints a successor from among us, appoints anyone he wishes?
- No, by All®h, indeed it is a covenant from the Messenger of All®h to one man after another, until it comes down to the one who is entrusted with it" (Kulayn® 1:2, IV, 320: had®th 739). In another had®th he explains that "The Im®mate is a covenant from All®h, to Whom belong Might and Majesty, which is entrusted to men who are named" (320: had®th 738).
- 5. Editor's Note: As Nasr explains, "Shelism believes that there is a 'Primordial Light' passed from one prophet to another and after the Prophet of Islem to the Imems. This light protects the prophets and Imems from sin, making them inerrant [ma'sem], and bestows upon them the knowledge of divine mysteries" (Settle Essays 111).

'Allemah Muhammad Beqir al-Majlise lists numerous traditions concerning this "Primordial Light" and how it was passed down from the prophets, to Muhammad and then to the Imems (see chapters 1 and 2 of Hayet al-quieb). According to Imem Khumayne:

[T]he Most Noble Messenger and the Imems existed before the creation of the world in the form of lights situated beneath the divine throne; they were superior even in the sperm from which they grew and in their physical composition. Their exalted station is limited only by the divine will, as indicated by the saying of Jibra'll recorded in the traditions on the mi'rel: "Were I to draw closer by as much as the breadth of a finger, surely I would burn." The Prophet himself said: "We have states with God that are beyond the reach of the cherubim and the prophets." It is part of our belief that the Imems too enjoy similar states... (Islem and Revolution 64–65)

Concerning these attributes of the Imms, see Henry Corbin, Histoire de la philosophie Islimique (Paris, 1964): 77 ff. It is recorded in al-Kifi that Imm al-Sidiq was asked about the verse: "Therefore, believe in Allih and His Messenger and in the Light which we have sent down" to which he responded:

The Light, by All®h, is the Light of the Im®ms from the Household of Muhammad till the Day of Resurrection. They, by All®h, are the Light which All®h has sent down, and they, by All®h, are the Light of All®h in the heavens and on the earth." (Kulayn® I80: had®th 514)

In Lantern of the Path, Im al-Sediq relates a fascinating tradition on the authority of Salmen al-Ferise in which the Messenger of Alleh explains that:

Allsh created me from the quintessence of light, and called me, so I obeyed Him. Then he created 'Als from my light, and called him, and he obeyed. From my light and the light of 'All He created Filtimah. He called her and she obeyed. From me, 'All and Filtimah, He created al-Hasan and al-Husayn. He called them and they obeyed Him. All has named us with five of His names: Alleh is al-Mahmed [the Praised] and I am Muhammad [praisworthy]; Alleh is al-'Ale [the High], and this is 'All [the one of high rank]; All h is al-Fetir [Creator out of nothing], and this is Fetimah; All h is the One with Ihsen [beneficence], and this is Hasan; Alleh is Muhassin [the Beautiful] and this is Husayn [the beautiful one]. He created nine Imems from the light of al-Husayn and called them and they obeyed Him, before Alleh created either Heaven on high, the out-stretched earth, the air, the angels or man. We were lights who glorified Him, listened to Him and obeyed Him. In The Origins and Development of She'ah Islem, Jafre questions the authenticity of the traditions describing the Imems as supernatural human beings and the miracles attributed to them (300, 303). Miracles and mysticism are clearly incompatible with his training as a historian. He holds that "a great many traditions ascribing supernatural and superhuman characteristics to the Imems, propounded by semi-qhulet circles in Kufah, crept into Shele literature" (303). He therefore dismisses the traditions concerning the light of All®h in 'Al® and the description of the Im®ms as the "shadows of light" and "luminous bodies" (302). She ite scholars, however, have always shown the greatest aversion towards ghuluw [extremism] and would not have accepted traditions from ghulot or even semi-ghulot sources. Shoite fugahol [jurists] are unanimous in their takfer [declaration of infidelity] of the ghulet (Khu'e 28; Gulpeygene 30 et al.). As Shaykh Sadeq says: Our belief concerning those who exceed the bounds of belief [ghel, pl. ghulet] and those who believe in delegation [almufawwidah] is that they are deniers [kuff@r] of All@h, Glory be to His name. They are more wicked than the Jews, the Christians, the Fire-Worshippers, the Qadarites or the Kharijites, or any of the heretics [ahl al-bid ah] or those who holds views which lead astray [al-ahws] al-mudillah]. (141-142)

While Jafr® may believe that excessively zealous Sh® ites exaggerated the status of the Im®ms, turning them into divine luminaries, what accounts for the presence of similar traditions in Sunn® and S®f® sources? In 'Abd al-Rahm®n Sulam®'s (d. 1021) famous compilation of the Qur'®n titled Haq® iq al-tafs®r, we find an exegesis of S®rah 2:37 which is startling for a Sunn® source. In interpreting the verse "and All®h taught Adam the names,"

Sulame quotes a tradition from Imem Ja'far to the effect that: "Alleh existed before His creation existed. He created five creatures from the light of His Glory and gave each one a name from among His Names: Being the Praised One [mahmed], He called His Prophet, Muhammad; being the Most High ['ale], He called the Leader of the Believers, 'Ale; being the Creator [fetir] of the heavens and the earth, he forged the name Fetimah; and since he has the most beautiful names [husne], He forged two names for Hasan and Husayn. He then placed them to the right of His Throne..."The traditions in question are numerous and widely recorded. We are not dealing with isolated traditions with weak chains of narrations [sanad] which can easily be dismissed.

- 6. Author's Note: See al-Kulayn, al-Kefe (Karachi 1965). There is also a more recent edition (Tehran 1400/1980). Editor's Note: al-Kefe fe 'ilm al-den [The Sufficient in the Knowledge of Religion] is one of the "Four (Fundamental) Books" of the She'ites. The others include Man le yahduruhu al-faqeh [For Him not in the Presence of a Jurist] by Shaykh al-Sadeq Muhammad ibn Bebawayh al-Qumme (d. 381/991), Tahdheb al-ahkem (Rectification of the Statutes) by Shaykh Muhammad al-Tese (d. 460/1068) and al-Istibser fe me ukhtulifa fehi min al-akhber (Reflection upon the Disputed Traditions) also by al-Tese.
- 7. Editor's Note: It is related that Im®m Muhammad al-B®qir said that "The first beings that All®h created were Muhammad and his family, the rightly guided ones and the guides; they were the phantoms of light before All®h" (Kulayn® 1: 279).
- 8. Editor's Note: The Messenger of All®h said of his Holy Household: "We are exactly the same as regards command, understanding, and what is lawful and what is unlawful" (Kulayn® 314: had®th 728). As Nasr explains,

The Im®ms are like a chain of light issuing forth from the "Sun of Prophecy" which is their origin, and yet they are never separated from that Sun. Whatever is said by them emanates from the same inviolable treasure of inspired wisdom. Since they are an extension of the inner reality of the Blessed Prophet, their words really go back to him.

That is why their sayings are seen in the Shelite perspective as an extension of the prophetic hadeth, just as the light of their being is seen as a continuation of the prophetic light. In Shelite eyes, the temporal separation of the Imems from the

Blessed Prophet does not at all affect their essential and inner bond with him or the continuity of the "prophetic light" which is the source of him as well as their inspired knowledge. (A Sh®ite Anthology 6–7)

9. Editor's Note: The office of the Im®mate and Caliphate was meant, by divine design, to function as the Government of God on earth. The Prophet has said that: "He, who denies 'Al® his Im®mate after me, verily denies my Prophethood [nubuwwah]. And he who denies my Prophethood has denied All®h His divinity" (Sad®q 107).

He also stated that "The Im®ms after me are twelve, the first of them is the Prince of Believers 'Al® ibn Ab® T®lib, and the last of them is the Mahd® [rightly-guided], the Q®'im [the upholder of the true religion]; obedience to them is obedience to me and disobedience to them is disobedience to me; and who denies one of them has verily denied me" (108). Im®m al—S®diq has said that: "He who denies the last among us is like him who denies the first among us" (108). The following tradition from Im®m al—S®diq illustrates what is at stake when the authority of Ahlul Baytis forsaken:

We are those obedience to whom All®h has made an obligation. Nothing is proper for the people except to know, nor are the people absolved from being ignorant about us. He who knows us is a believer, and he who denies us is an unbeliever. He who neither knows us nor denies us is misguided, till he returns to the path of guidance, which All®h has made an obligation for him as a binding obligation to us. If he dies in misguidance, All®h will do with him whatever he pleases. (Kulayn® 60 had®th 489)

The Im®m has also issued the following firm warning: "Whoever dies without having known and acknowledged the Im®m of his Age dies as an infidel" (Kulayn® I 318). Recognition of the Im®m is an absolute duty of every believer. Loving the Household of the Prophet is mandatory. As we read in the Holy Qur'®n:

"No reward do I ask of you for this except the love of those near of kin" (42:23)

This is not to imply that failure to recognize the Imems is an act of disbelief. As Ayetulleh Mutahhare clarifies in Islem and Religious Pluralism:

The verses and traditions that indicate that the actions of those who deny Prophethood or Im®mate are not acceptable are with a view to denial out of obstinacy and bias; however, denial that is merely a lack of confession out of incapacity (qus@r)—rather than out ofculpability (taqs@r)—is not what the verses and traditions are about. In the view of the Qur'@n, such deniers are considered musta'af (powerless) and murjawn li'amr illah (those whose affair is referred to God's command).

10. Editor's Note: Sunnism is primarily ritualistic while S@fism is primarily spiritualistic. Sh@'ism presents a balance between the ritual and the spiritual. As Nasr explains, "S@fism does not possess a shar@'ah; it is only a spiritual way [tar@qah] attached to a particular Shar@'ite rite such as the M@lik@ or Sh@fi@. Sh@'ism possesses both a shar@'ah and a tar@qah"

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