

Chapter 9: The Imamate, The Esoteric Inheritance or the Batin of the Prophet

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To sum up the political aspects of Islamic history, it is clear that the Caliphate is transmitted by way of *naḥw* through which the Prophet or the Imam designates who will succeed him in the Imamate.¹ **The Imam is the sole expert of the inner sense of the Scripture and the Sunnah. This exclusive knowledge was passed directly from the Prophet to 'Alī and through him to his descendants.**² The Imam is thus the definitive authority on religion obligations [*wajib*/*fur*] and the esoteric interpretation [*tafsir*/*ta'wif*] of the *shar'ah* [Islamic law]. Furthermore, the Imam possesses the quality of *'imamah*, infallibility and impeccability.³ The controversial and contentious issue of the succession of the Prophet, disputed by Sunnis and Shi'ites for over a millennium, can never be understood if the essentially esoteric function of the Imamate, as a prolongation and complement to the Prophethood, is overlooked. **The issue of the Imamate 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 *batin* [esoteric aspect] of the Prophethood.

For Shi'ites, **the completion of the "Cycle of Prophethood" [*d'irat al-nubuwwah*] marks the beginning of the "Cycle of Initiation" [*d'irat al-wilayah*].** For metaphysical and cosmological reasons, the Cycle of *wilayah* was to be opened through its own "door" [*al-bab*], 'Alī ibn Abī Ḥabīb, due to his role as "spiritual successor" [*khalifah rasul*] and "executer" [*wasī*] of the Prophet's *batin* [secrets] or initiator into the Muhammadan mysteries. This is why the Imamate 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 *wilayah* [guardianship].

As Corbin senses, **the concept of the Imams can only be understood if one considers them as**

divine luminaries and pre-cosmic entities.⁵ They themselves affirmed so during the course of their worldly existence. Many traditions to this effect were gathered by al-Kulaynī in his voluminous compilation *al-Kāfī*.⁶ They stress the fact that the Prophet and the Imām are from the same essence and the same light⁷ and what is said of one is applicable to any one of the twelve.⁸

Shī‘ite gnosis enables us to understand the importance of the situation and exactly what was on the line with the Caliphate.⁹ **By the political substitution of Abū Bakr for ‘Alī, the organic link between the *ẓāhir* [exoteric] and the *bāṭin* [esoteric] was temporarily broken. In Sunnism, this led to the development of a legalistic religion, based on a purely juristic interpretation of Islām. ¹⁰ It was thus left to the *ẓāfir* and Shī‘ite Islām to preserve, in their exoteric practices and doctrines, the lost esoteric equilibrium.**

¹. Editor’s Note: The naṣṣ or appointment of ‘Alī and the succeeding Imāms is one of the issues stressed by Shaykh Mufīd in *Kitāb al-irshād*.

². Editor’s Note: As Imām al-ḥadiq explains, “‘Alī 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-Kāfī*, 156: ḥadīth 590). Imām al-Riḍā wrote in a letter that “Muḥammad was Allāh’s custodian over His creatures. When he was taken, we, the Household, were his inheritors” (160, ḥadīth 598).

³. Editor’s Note: ‘Imāmah may also be translated as “a state of sinlessness.”

⁴. Editor’s Note: There can be no monarchy in Islām as can be seen in Imām Khumaynī’s “The Incompatibility of Monarchy with Islām,” *Islām and Revolution* (Berkeley: Mizan P, 1981): 200–208. The Imāmate was given to those appointed by Allāh, and was not necessarily from father to eldest son. As Imām al-ḥadiq explains “Do you think that he who appoints a successor from among us, appoints anyone he wishes? No, by Allāh, indeed it is a covenant from the Messenger of Allāh to one man after another, until it comes down to the one who is entrusted with it” (*Kulaynī* 1:2, IV, 320: ḥadīth 739). In another ḥadīth, he explains that “The Imāmate is a covenant from Allāh, to Whom belong Might and Majesty, which is entrusted to men who are named” (320: ḥadīth 738).

⁵. Editor’s Note: As Naṣr explains, “Shī‘ism believes that there is a ‘Primordial Light’ passed from one prophet to another and after the Prophet of Islām to the Imāms. This light protects the prophets and Imāms from sin, making them inerrant [*ma‘ṣūm*], and bestows upon them the knowledge of divine mysteries” (*ẓāfir* Essays 111). ‘Allāmah Muḥammad Baqir al-Majlisī lists numerous traditions concerning this “Primordial Light” and how it was passed down from the prophets, to Muḥammad and then to the Imāms (see chapters 1 and 2 of *ḥayāt al-qulūb*). According to Imām Khumaynī: The Most Noble Messenger and the Imāms 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 Jibrā‘īl recorded in the traditions on the *mi‘raj*: “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 Imāms too enjoy similar states... (*Islām and Revolution* 64–65)

Concerning these attributes of the Imāms, see Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie Islāmique* (Paris, 1964): 77 ff.

It is recorded in *al-Kāfī* that Imām al-ḥadiq was asked about the verse: “Therefore, believe in Allāh and His Messenger and in the Light which we have sent down” to which he responded:

The Light, by Allāh, is the Light of the Imāms from the Household of Muḥammad till the Day of Resurrection. They, by Allāh, are the Light which Allāh has sent down, and they, by Allāh, are the Light of Allāh in the heavens and on the earth.” (*Kulaynī* I80: ḥadīth 514)

In *Lantern of the Path*, Imām al-ḥadiq relates a fascinating tradition on the authority of Salmān al-Fārisī in where the Messenger of Allāh explains that:

Allāh created me from the quintessence of light, and called me, so I obeyed Him. Then he created ‘Alī from my light, and

called him, and he obeyed. From my light and the light of 'Alī He created Fāṭimah. He called her and she obeyed. From me, 'Alī and Fāṭimah, He created al-ḥasan and al-ḥusayn. He called them and they obeyed Him. Allāh has named us with five of His names: Allāh is al-Ma'mūd [the Praised] and I am Muḥammad [praiseworthy]; Allāh is al-'Alī [the High], and this is 'Alī [the one of high rank]; Allāh is al-Fā'ir [Creator out of nothing], and this is Fāṭimah; Allāh is the One with Iṣṣan [beneficence], and this is ḥasan; Allāh is Muḥassin [the Beautifying] and this is ḥusayn [the beautiful one]. He created nine Imams from the light of al-ḥusayn and called them and they obeyed Him, before Allāh 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.

6. In *The Origins and Development of Shī'ah Islām*, Jafrī questions the authenticity of the traditions describing the Imams 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 Imams, propounded by semi-ghulāt circles in Kufah, crept into Shī'ah literature” (303). He therefore dismisses the traditions concerning the light of Allāh in 'Alī and the description of the Imams as the “shadows of light” and “luminous bodies” (302).

Shī'ite scholars, however, have always shown the greatest aversion towards ghulūw [extremism] and would not have accepted traditions from ghulāt or even semi-ghulāt sources. Shī'ite fuqahā' [jurists] are unanimous in their takfīr [declaration of infidelity] of the ghulāt (Khu'ī 28; Gulpūyghānī 30 et al.). As Shaykh ḥādīq says,

Our belief concerning those who exceed the bounds of belief [ghulāt, pl. ghulāt] and those who believe in delegation [al-mufawwiḥah] is that they are deniers [kuffār] of Allāh, 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-ahwā' al-muḥillah]. (141–142)

While Jafrī may believe that excessively zealous Shī'ites exaggerated the status of the Imams, turning them into divine luminaries, what accounts for the presence of similar traditions in Sunnī and ḥafīf sources? In 'Abd al-Raḥmān Sulamī's (d. 1021) famous compilation of the Qur'ān titled *Haqīq al-tafsīr*, we find an exegesis of Sūrah 2:37 which is startling for a Sunnī source. In interpreting the verse “and Allāh taught Adam the names,” Sulamī quotes a tradition from Imam Ja'far to the effect that:

Allāh 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 [ma'mūd], He called His Prophet, Muḥammad; being the Most High ['alī], He called the Leader of the Believers, 'Alī; being the Creator [fā'ir] of the heavens and the earth, he forged the name Fāṭimah; and since he has the most beautiful names [iṣṣan], He forged two names for ḥasan and ḥusayn. 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.

Author's Note: See al-Kulaynī, al-Kūfī (Karachi 1965). There is also a more recent edition (Tehran 1400/1980).

Editor's Note: al-Kūfī fī 'ilm al-dīn [The Sufficient in the Knowledge of Religion] is one of the “Four (Fundamental) Books” of the Shī'ites. The others include *Man lā yaḥduruhu al-faqīh* [For Him not in the Presence of a Jurist] by Shaykh al-ḥādīq Muḥammad ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī (d. 381/991), *Tahdhīb al-aḥkām* (Rectification of the Statutes) by Shaykh Muḥammad al-ḥāsī (d. 460/1068) and *al-Istibṣār fī m' ukhtulifa fīhi min al-akhbār* (Reflection upon the Disputed Traditions) also by al-ḥāsī.

7. Editor's Note: It is related that Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir said that “The first beings that Allāh created were Muḥammad and his family, the rightly guided ones and the guides; they were the phantoms of light before Allāh” (Kulaynī 1: 279).

8. Editor's Note: The Messenger of Allāh said of his Holy Household: “We are exactly the same as regards command, understanding, and what is lawful and what is unlawful” (Kulaynī 314: ḥadīth 728). As Naṣīr explains, The Imams 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 Shī'ite perspective as an extension of the prophetic ḥādīth, just as the light of their being is seen as a continuation of the prophetic light. In Shī'ite eyes, the temporal separation of the Imams 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 Shi‘ite Anthology 6–7)

9. Editor’s Note: The office of the Im‘amate and Caliphate was meant, by divine design, to function as the Government of God on earth. The Prophet has said that: “He, who denies ‘Alī his Im‘amate after me, verily denies my Prophethood [nubuwwah]. And he who denies my Prophethood has denied Allāh His divinity” (Sad‘iq 107). He also stated that The Im‘ams after me are twelve, the first of them is the Prince of Believers ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and the last of them is the Mahdī [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‘am al–Ḥadiq 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‘am al–Ḥadiq illustrates what is at stake when the authority of ahl al–bayt is forsaken:

We are those obedience to whom Allāh 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 Allāh has made an obligation for him as a binding obligation to us. If he dies in misguidance, Allāh will do with him whatever he pleases. (Kulaynī 60 Ḥadīth 489)

The Im‘am has also issued the following firm warning: “Whoever dies without having known and acknowledged the Im‘am of his Age dies as an infidel” (Kulaynī I 318). Recognition of the Im‘am is an absolute duty of every believer. Loving the Household of the Prophet is mandatory. As we read in the Holy Qur‘ān: “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 Im‘ams is an act of disbelief. As Ay‘atullāh Mu‘ahharī clarifies in *Islam and Religious Pluralism*:

The verses and traditions that indicate that the actions of those who deny Prophethood or Im‘amate 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 (quḥūr)—rather than out of culpability (taqḥūr)—is not what the verses and traditions are about. In the view of the Qur‘ān, 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 Ṣūfism is primarily spiritualistic. Shī‘ism presents a balance between the ritual and the spiritual. As Naṣr explains, “Ṣūfism does not possess a shar‘ah; it is only a spiritual way [ṣar‘ah] attached to a particular Shar‘ite rite such as the Malīkī or Shāfi‘ī. Shī‘ism possesses both a shar‘ah and a ṣar‘ah” (Ṣūfī Essays 107).

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