

Imamah

The major distinction between the school of Ahlul Bayt and the other Islamic schools of thought revolves around the issue of *Imamah*, or the early succession to Prophet Muhammad. The school of Ahlul Bayt maintains that the office of the imam is a divine office – meaning, the *imam* or *khalifah* (leadership) has to be appointed and given directly by Allah, for this office holds the same significance as that of prophethood. People are thus commanded by Allah to follow specific successors (*imams*) after the demise of the Prophet.

Other schools of thought say that the imam is determined by *shura* (election) and that this method was used to determine the successor of the Prophet Muhammad. However, the Shi'a school of thought considers that the concept of shura was never fully enacted after the death of the Prophet because ibn Qutaybah asserts that the first caliph was nominated mainly by two people;¹

Ibn Kathir says that he had confined the candidacy for the khilafah to 'Umar ibn al-Khattab and Abu 'Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrah, both of whom declined and nominated him, a nomination that was seconded by Ma'adh, 'Usayd, Bashir, and Zayd ibn Thabit.² Tabari narrates that the Ansar refused to submit to his allegiance in al-Saqifah (the place where the matter of immediate succession to the Prophet was discussed) and declared that they would only pay allegiance to 'Ali (because he was the one appointed by the Prophet to be his successor).³

The first caliph has been recorded to have said in his inaugural ceremony, “O people! I was appointed over you, but I am not the best one among you.”⁴ Historian ibn Abi al-Hadid al-Mu'tazili records that the second caliph admitted his role in orchestrating the meeting at al-Saqifah when he later declared that paying allegiance to the first caliph had been a mistake (*faltah*) but that Allah had averted the disaster of it from the Muslims.⁵

The concept of shura however was not implemented during the second caliph's ascension to the caliphate since the first caliph appointed him before his death. It was not even enacted during the ascension of the third caliph to power, since he was also selected nominally by five people, but in essence by one—namely, the second caliph, who also appointed two governors to remain in power after his death namely: Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqass and Abu Musa al-Ash'ari.⁶

Qur'anic Evidence for the Divine Ordination of the Imam

Numerous verses in the Noble Qur'an refer to the fact that throughout history Allah alone has the right to ordain an *imam* (leader) or *khalifah* for mankind – some of them are as follows:

And remember when your Lord said to the angels, ***'Verily, I am going to place [for mankind] a successor (khalifah) on the earth.'***⁷

O David! Verily We have placed you as a successor (khalifah) on the earth, so judge between men with truth and justice, and follow not your desires, for they will mislead you from the path of Allah.⁸

And remember when the Lord of Abraham tried him with certain commands which he fulfilled. Allah said to him, 'Verily I am going to make you a leader (imam) for mankind.' Abraham said, 'And (what about) my offspring?' Allah said, 'My providence (does not) includes the wrongdoers.'⁹

And We made from among them leaders (imams), giving guidance under Our command, when they were patient and believed with certainty in Our proofs and evidence.¹⁰

These verses clarify that not just anyone is entitled to assume the office of leadership or the *imamah* and one who qualifies for this is the one who Allah examines and he fulfills Allah's test. In particular, the Noble Qur'an in the above verse of 2:124 stresses very clearly that the wrongdoers (*dhalimeen*) are forbidden from assuming the leadership of the believers.

Yet, does Islamic history show this command to have been carried out? How many caliphs and sultans during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods were corrupt and did not practice Islam properly, yet they were leaders of the Muslim nation?

Succession—khilafah or imamah—is appointed solely by Allah whenever it is mentioned in the Noble Qur'an. In the school of Ahlul Bayt, the khilafah refers not only to temporal power and political authority over the people but more importantly, it indicates the authority to do so. This authority must be from Allah since Allah attributes governing and judgment to Himself.

^{1.} Ibn Qutaybah, *al-Imamah wal-Siyasah*, Vol. 1, 6,

^{2.} Ibn Kathir, *al-Sira al-Nabawiyah*, Vol. 2, 494

^{3.} *al-Tabari Tarikh*, Vol. 2, 443

^{4.} *al-Suyuti, Tarikh al-Khulafa'*, 69

^{5.} Ibn Abi al-Hadid *al-Mu'tazili, Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah*, Vol. 2, 29

^{6.} *Ibid.*, Vol. 9, 50

^{7.} Noble Qur'an, 2:30

^{8.} Noble Qur'an, 38:26

^{9.} Noble Qur'an, 2:124

^{10.} Noble Qur'an, 32:24

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