

Lesson 14: The Imāmat: Succession to the Prophet

1. Introduction

Eventually the inevitable occurred and the soul of the Prophet (a.s.) flew to its eternal abode. For in the words of the poet Nizāmī, 'he who has not died and will never die is only God'.

It was clear that with the death of this great man a storm would blow up over the peaceful ocean of Islam, and that turbulent waters would be churned up. The ambitious would try to benefit and to get as much as they could from this turbulence and commotion, to fish in these troubled waters. On the other hand, we know that the great mass of people believe in anything they see; they have always been thus and have always been fuel for a fire that anyone may care to kindle. They need constant training and continual taking care of, and without an educator they cannot reach their own perfection.

Now we must ask if such a society, in such conditions, needs a leader who can take the reins of command in the place of the Prophet or not, so that the result of all the pains the Messenger of Allah took should not be dissipated? Is there not a need for a knowledgeable, political authority who is thoroughly acquainted with the Divine laws and who can guide and lead the people on the right path in the right way?

The Shi'a belief holds that the Love of God and His infinite wisdom demand that after the Prophet the people should not be without a leader. Such a leader must be sinless and wise, so that his correctness of speech and action may be a guarantee and a true sign of a superior man, someone selected by God. He must take the reins of the Muslim community in his hands and lead and guide them with the extensive wisdom and foresight, without error, and this he must take from the Prophet of Islam. Because there is no reason for God, Who was considerate of the people in the time of the Prophet to change His judgment and to withdraw His loving concern.

How could it be possible that God, Who by His Grace created thousands of elaborate details for the

protection and growth of our bodies, has neglected to appoint a goodly successor to the Prophet? Does not the bringing into existence of the best of communities, which is the aim of Islam, need the selection of the best of leaders? Is not the appointment of a sinless leader, educator and Imam the basis of the contentment of society? Can Islamic society attain contentment and happiness without divine supervision and leadership?

So if there is a need for the divine, sinless leader, and Islamic society wants a divine educator, how can it be said that this matter has been ignored by Islam and that the people have been left to themselves?

In short, the same philosophy which demands the appointment of the Prophet also precisely demands that God should introduce and appoint a successor through the Prophet.

The Prophet of Islam (a.s.) said in the latter part of his life: “O People, I swear before Allāh that I have explained what will make you nearer to heaven and what will take you far from the Fire.” With this explanation, how can it be said that the Prophet of Islam did not appoint his immediate successor?

2. Is the Qur’ān not Sufficient?

The Qur’ān is the fundamental basis for every kind of Islamic concept. Like a mighty rock, all the fruitful buildings of Islamic knowledge have been made steady on it. It is the clear spring from which all the streams of insight flow. The credibility and prestige of other religious foundations rest on it.

But, on the basis of the proofs we shall give, one cannot be content with the Qur’ān alone to solve the problems of leadership, the differences which crop up in Islamic society, or to satisfy the needs of the Muslims people.

1. Firstly because the Qur’ān and its great and abundant contents need commentary and explanation. Since all the verses are not alike in clarity, unacquainted readers in the first moments of their journey may become lost and not take the path to their destination.

So the Prophet himself or those appointed by him who have a spiritual link with what is beyond the external world, must be a guide in this valley also, so that they can interpret and explain the Qur’ānic verses according to Allāh’s purpose. For if not, ordinary people will sometimes interpret incorrectly and will end up far from the truth. The Prophet himself has said, “Anyone who interprets the Qur’ān according to his own opinions will have a place in the Fire.”

It is recounted that a thief was brought into the presence of the Abbasid caliph Mu`tasim so that he might be punished according to the punishment prescribed in the Qur’ān. The command of the Qur’ān is: “Cut off the hand of a thief.” But Mu`tasim did not know from where the hand should be cut. He asked his Sunni `ulama.

One of them said, “From the wrist.”

“From the elbow,” another said.

Mu`tasim was not satisfied. He was forced to ask Imam Muhammad at-Taqi (a.s.), the ninth Shi‘a Imam, who was present in that gathering. The Imam replied,

“Only four fingers must be cut off.”

“Why?”

“Since Allāh has decreed in the Qur’ān, **‘And that the places of sajdah are for Allāh.’ (72: 18)** that is the seven places of the body [which touches the ground in prostration], so they should not be cut off.”

All those present accepted and were satisfied with his proof.

This kind of interpretation is in fact interpretation of the Qur’ān by the Qur’ān, and is peculiar to the Ahlu ‘l-bayt (a.s.), and no one, to whatever degree he may be a master of interpretation, is able to succeed in perfectly understanding interpretation in this way unless he has taken the lead from the Imams of the Ahlu ‘l-bayt and has made them his example.

2. What we have said above is only in regard to the correct interpretation of the esoteric meaning and commands of the Qur’ān. But beneath the esoteric words and meanings of the Qur’ān, there are shades and layers of spiritual messages which can only be correctly explained by qualified guides. The Prophet of Islam (a.s.) said, “The Qur’ān has a beautiful outer meaning and a profound inner meaning.”¹ He also said, “The Qur’ān has profundity, and its profundity is deep too, up to seven inner layers.”²

According to the great exegetists, the entire Qur’ān has a hermeneutics and an inner meaning to it, and to arrive at them by thought and research alone is not possible. It is not explicable to all through words, for the ability to perceive and practice this is not given to all men. Only those near to God, the pure, those free from moral corruption, can comprehend this, and use it for the solution of the differences and incidents between men, and learn it, and then, by virtue of the immunity from error and mistake that they have from God, teach it to others.

Those who are spiritually near to God and free from error are the Prophet and his Ahlu ‘l-bayt about whom the Qur’ān says: **Allah desires only to keep away from you, O the Ahlu ‘l-bayt, abomination and to cleanse you. (33:33)** There is also a hadith which says that only the Prophet and his Ahlu ‘l-bayt can perceive all the truths of the Qur’ān.³ This implies that the Prophet (who was the recipient of the Qur’ān) and his Ahlu ‘l-bayt (who were his close family-members) are more acquainted with the meaning of the Qur’ān.

It is because of this connection between the Qur’ān and the Ahlu ‘l-bayt that the Prophet said, "I leave two things in your trust, the Book of Allah and my family; if you attach yourselves to these two you will never go astray."⁴

As a postscript, the summary of this lesson can be found in the discussion which students of Imam Ja`far as-S`adiq (a.s.) had with a Sunni in the presence of the Imam. A man from Damascus (which was the support base of the Umayyids) had come to Medina with the intention of debating with one of the students of Imam Ja`far as-S`adiq (a.s.).

The Imam said, "Introduce this man to Hisham." Hisham was the youngest of his students.

"O Child," said the man from Damascus, "ask me concerning the imamate of this man (referring to Imam Ja`far as-S`adiq)."

Hisham was angered by his lack of manners and shuddered. But he concealed his temper and began: "Is your Creator more kind and loving towards His slaves, or the slaves themselves?"

"The Creator."

"What has the loving Creator done for his slaves?"

"He has appointed a clear guidance and proof, to protect them from differences and disunity, and to establish friendship and unity among them. He has made clear to them their religious duties."

"Who is that guide?"

"The Prophet."

"Who is it after the death of the Prophet?"

"The Book of Allah and the sunnah of the Prophet of Islam."

"Can the Book of Allah and the sunnah of the Prophet prevent us from differences today?"

"Yes."

"So why do you and I who are both Muslims have a dispute, or in other words, why have you come here from Damascus as a result of this difference?"

The man from Damascus was silent and said no more.

Imam Ja`far as-S`adiq (a.s.) said to him, "Why don't you speak up?"

"What shall I say?" he replied. "If I say we have no difference, then I lie. And just as I said the Book of Allah and the sunnah of the Prophet should take away the differences between us, so this also is untrue, because, in many instances, the Book of Allah and the sunnah do not have a clear and obvious meaning that could dispel our differences."

So the man from Damascus said that he wanted to ask the very same question from Hisham. The Imam agreed.

"O Hisham. Who is more loving towards people? God, or the people themselves?"

"God."

"Did he send them someone to protect the unity of Muslims and to take over their control, to explain to them the truth and falsity?"

"Are you talking about the time of the Prophet, or about now?"

“In the time of the Prophet, it was him; no, tell me about now.”

“Today it is this man who is seated here and to whom people come from every corner of the land, and who gives us news of the heaven and the earth; and this knowledge was bequeathed to him from his father and so on back to the Prophet.”

“How can I verify and accept this statement for myself?”

“Go now and ask him anything you like.”

“That's right, there is no excuse; only I must ask.”

Then Imam Ja`far as-Sādiq (a.s.) told him about his journey and of the things that had happened to him on his way which only the man could know of. When he had explained so that no doubt remained for him, the man declared his belief in the Imam.

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This lesson has been adapted with minor changes from Dar Rah-e Haqq, *The Roots of Religion*, Qum, Iran.

Question Paper on Lesson 14

Question 1: [14 points]

True or False:

- (a) Islamic society needs a divine educator who can guide people to the right path.
- (b) All Qur'ānic verses are equally clear in their meaning and contain straight forward instructions.
- (c) An Imam is a divinely appointed person whose function is to interpret and explain the Qur'ān according to God's purpose.
- (d) The Qur'ān alone can guide people to the right path in the right way.
- (e) The Qur'ānic verses have an inner meaning that can be derived by thoughtful research and intellectual inquiry.
- (f) An Imam is appointed by the Prophet to continue the office of prophethood after his death.
- (g) The Qur'ān has a beautiful outer meaning and a profound inner meaning.

Question 2: [20 points]

For each of the following statements circle the number of the most correct answer:

- (a) If the Qur'ān was sufficient to guide Muslims to the right path, then
 - (i) the history of the Muslims would have been different.

(ii) exegetists would not have disagreed on the interpretation of Qur'ānic verses.

(iii) there would not be 73 sects in Islam each claiming its interpretation of the Qur'ān as most accurate.

(iv) people would interpret the Qur'ān according to their personal preference.

(b) Imams are appointed by

(i) people.

(ii) the Prophet.

(iii) prominent people of the community.

(iv) God.

(c) What is the most important quality of a divinely appointed Imam.

(i) honesty.

(ii) integrity.

(iii) truthfulness.

(iv) infallibility.

(v) trustworthiness.

(d) Exegetists are scholars and intellectuals who

(i) translate the Qur'ānic verses.

(ii) interpret the Qur'ānic verses.

(iii) narrate hadith.

(iv) explain the sunnah.

(v) describe history.

(e) is logical to conclude, based on this lesson, that an Imam should provide

(i) spiritual leadership.

(ii) temporal authority.

(iii) moral leadership.

(iv) a political leadership based on highest moral and ethical standards.

(v) both spiritual and political leadership based on the Qur'^٩n and sunnah.

Question 3: [8 points]

Describe the hadith narrated by the Sunni scholar, Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, which undeniably proves not only the necessity but also the existence of a divinely appointed Imam.

Question 4: [8 points]

Explain and discuss the most powerful argument that a disciple of Imam Ja`far as-S^٩adiq (a.s.) presented to a man from Damascus against the belief that the Qur'^٩n is sufficient to guide the people to the right path.

[1.](#) Al-Kulayni, al-Usul min al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 599.

[2.](#) Al-Kashani, Tafsir as-Safi, vol. 1, p. 39.

[3.](#) Tafsir Mir'atu 'l-Anwar, p. 16.

[4.](#) Ibn Hanbal, Musnad, vol. 3 (Beirut) p. 17; al-Amini, al-Ghadir, vol. 1, p. 55; Ghayatu 'l-Mar^٩m, p. 212

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