

Responsibility 1: Ma'rifat of the Imam (as) Part 1

One of the most important responsibilities for a Shi'a is to acquire ma'rifah (a detailed and profound understanding) of the Imam of the time, and the testimony to this can be seen in both the logical and narrated proofs (ahadith).

It is clear from the traditions that we must know the characteristics and specific traits of the Imam (as) whom we are all obliged to follow. This must be done so that we do not mistake him for someone who claims his status. In addition, there are also numerous traditions which oblige us to have a ma'rifah of our Imam (as).

It has been related from Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad as-Sadiq (as) that the Prophet of Allah said:

مَنْ مَاتَ وَ لَمْ يَعْرِفْ إِمَامَ زَمَانِهِ مَاتَ مِيتَةَ جَاهِلِيَّةٍ

“One who dies while he does not have ma'rifah of the Imam (as) of his time, dies the death of Jahiliyyah (the period of Ignorance before the time of the Prophet (saws))”¹

In another tradition, this one from the eleventh Imam, Hasan 'Ali al-'Askari (as), it is mentioned that:

أَنَّ الْأَرْضَ لَا تَخْلُو مِنْ حُجَّةِ اللَّهِ عَلَى خَلْقِهِ وَ أَنَّ مَنْ مَاتَ وَ لَمْ يَعْرِفْ إِمَامَ زَمَانِهِ مَاتَ مِيتَةَ جَاهِلِيَّةٍ فَقَالَ: إِنَّ هَذَا حَقٌّ كَمَا أَنَّ النَّارَ حَقٌّ فَقِيلَ: يَا ابْنَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ فَمَنْ الْحُجَّةُ وَ الْإِمَامُ بَعْدَكَ؟ فَقَالَ: إِبْنِي مُحَمَّدٌ هُوَ الْإِمَامُ وَ الْحُجَّةُ بَعْدِي فَمَنْ مَاتَ وَ لَمْ يَعْرِفْهُ مَاتَ مِيتَةَ جَاهِلِيَّةٍ

“Unquestionably, the Earth can never remain devoid of a hujjat (proof) of Allah over His creations. Indeed the person who dies without recognizing the Imam of his age has died the death of Jahiliyyah.” The Imam (as) continued: “Surely this (the issue of an Imam existing for all ages) is true, just as the (existence of) hell fire is true.”

It was said to the Imam: “O’ son of the Messenger of Allah! Who is the hujjat and Imam after you?” The Imam replied: “My son, Muhammad is the Imam and hujjat after me. Whoever dies and has not recognized him (as his Imam) has died the death of Jahiliyyah.”²

Without doubt, the meaning of these traditions which state that it is obligatory to recognize the Imam of the time is that those who possess true faith must know the Imam in the way and to the extent that would lead to their happiness in this world and the next.

In addition, the recognition of the Imam must be such that there remains no room for misguidance or confusion in regards to this noble personality.

Thus, recognition can be divided into two types:

1. Ma’rifah of the personality of the Imam;
2. Ma’rifah of the Imam himself.

In order to acquire these two forms of ma’rifah, we must refer to the writings of the scholars of the faith.³

We must realize that recognizing the character and personality of the Imam can only be achieved through understanding his qualities, attributes and special traits which are related to the status of Imamate.

If we are successful in becoming acquainted with the status of Imamate, its central role in Islam and its characteristics and qualities, then we will become acquainted with any Imam since all of the A`immah are created from one nur (Divine celestial light) and in the words of the leaders of true guidance themselves:

“The first of us is Muhammad, the middle of us is Muhammad and the last of us is Muhammad!”⁴ Thus, we must have ma’rifah of the merits and excellence of all of our A`immah (as) since they share these traits amongst themselves

On the other hand, we must also become acquainted with the merits of excellence which are specific to the Imam whom we wish to know more about so that our ma’rifah of him can become complete. This form of ma’rifah can be acquired through knowledge of his name, title, titles of appellation, genealogy, characteristics, virtues, and other traits which relate to the specific time and place in which he lives.

The minimum and maximum limits of these two types of ma’rifah of the Imam can be understood by our intellect and in brief, we will mention the minimum limit as stated in the traditions.

Imam Ja’far b. Muhammad as-Sadiq (as) has said: “The minimum level of ma’rifah of the Imam is to know that he is on par with the Prophet except in the status of prophethood. The Imam is the inheritor of the Prophet, and obedience to the Imam is equivalent to obedience of Allah and the Messenger of Allah.

Thus, you must submit to the Imam in all issues, and all questions must be referred to him. You must act in accordance with his commands and must know that the Imam after the Messenger of Allah was ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (as). After him it was Hasan (as), then Husain (as), then ‘Ali b. al-Husain (as), then Muhammad b. ‘Ali (as), then Ja’far b. Muhammad (as), then Musa b. Ja’far (as), then ‘Ali b. Musa (as), then Muhammad b. ‘Ali (as), then ‘Ali b. Muhammad (as), then Hasan b. ‘Ali (as) and then al-Hujjah b. al-Hasan (ajtf) – these are your leaders.”⁵

As was previously mentioned, in order to recognize the Imam, we must know his name, titles of appellation, the name of his father and other incidental facts. However, we must also know his qualities of excellence and special merits.

The Imam of our time (ajtf) shares the same first name as the Prophet Muhammad (S). His title is also the same as that of the Prophet of Allah (S) (Abul Qasim) and his title of appellation is al-Mahdi. He has a beautiful black mark on his right shoulder blade, a very handsome face with a nose that is slightly protruded and is of average height.

In addition, we also need to understand the specialties related to the time and place of the Imam and the events surrounding him including his actions and speech.

For example, we need to know that in order for the Imam to make his advent, five signs must be fulfilled. We know that when he makes his appearance, the Earth would be full of oppression and corruption. However, before his advent, a sound will be heard from the sky an image of a hand will be seen on the moon the staff of Musa will be seen with him and many other signs.

It should be noted that all of these signs are mentioned in the books of traditions⁶ and the appearance of these will herald his return. In addition, there are also other special signs related to him which we must know and understand. Therefore knowing these signs constitutes one of the ways in which we can recognize our living Imam.

¹. Biharul Anwar, vol. 53, pg. 175, sec. 31, no. 7; al-Ihtijaj, pg. 498

². Wasa’il ash-Shi’a, vol. 11, pg. 491, sec. 33, no. 23

³. Books such as: al-Ghaybah, written by Shaykh Muhammad b. Ibrahim Nu’mani better known as Ibne Abi Zainab; al-Ghaybah of Shaykh Tusi; Najm al-Thaqib of Shaykh Tabrisi Nuri; Kamal ad-Din wa Tamam an-Ni’mah of Shaykh Saduq; A’yan ash-Shi’a (section on Imam al-Mahdi); Biharul Anwar (section on Imamah and the book of Imam al-Mahdi); Usul al-Kafi, vol. 1 and 2.

⁴. al-Ghaybah of Nu’mani, pg. 85; Biharul Anwar, vol. 36, pg. 399, sec. 46, no. 9

⁵. al-Burhan, vol. 2, pg. 35, no. 3

⁶. Books such as al-Ghaybah of Shaykh Muhammad b. Ibrahim Nu’mani better known as Ibne Abi Zainab; al-Ghaybah of Shaykh Tusi; Najm al-Thaqib of Shaykh Tabrisi Nuri; Kamal ad-Din wa Tamam an-Ni’mah of Shaykh Saduq.

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