

## Succession to the Prophet Muhammad (Imama)

The universal messengers of God had successors. God appointed His messengers for the guidance of humankind. God also appointed successors to the prophets and messengers as a matter of necessity. Prophet Abraham was succeeded by two of his sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Prophet Moses during his lifetime and afterwards was succeeded by his brother, Aaron.

Even Prophet Jesus had successors. Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad was succeeded by twelve distinguished successors, one after another. These successors are called *imams* and were appointed by God, not by humankind. The right to ordain imams belongs to God, and the Quran makes this point in many verses, “**And remember when your Lord said to the angels, 'Verily I am going to place a successor [khalifa]'**” (2:30). “**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] of mankind'**” (2:124).

God addressed Prophet David as such, “**O David! Verily We have placed you as a successor on earth**” (38:26). God also attributes the right of appointing leaders to Himself; “**We made from among them leaders, giving guidance under Our command**” (32:24). During the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, he mentioned specifically the names of the leaders [imams] that would come after him. The Prophet said that there would be twelve leaders, and that all of them would be descendents of Quraysh. [1](#)

The imams were the authorities of God among humankind. The imams all had special personalities in matters of knowledge, forbearance, morality, and justice.

The twelve successors to the Prophet Muhammad are as follows:

### [1. Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib.](#)

*Father's name:* Abu Talib ibn<sup>2</sup> Abd al-Muttalib.

*Mother's name:* Lady Fatima bint<sup>3</sup> Asad.

*Birth:* Makkah, on the 13th of Rajab, 23BH<sup>4</sup> (600CE).

*Death:* Murdered at the age of sixty-three. While praying, he was mortally wounded by a poisoned sword of an assassin on the 21st of Ramadan 40H [5](#)(661CE), in Kufa. Buried in an-Najaf al-Ashraf (Iraq).

Known as the “Commander of the Faithful” (*Amir al-Muminin*). Imam Ali was the Prophet's first cousin and son-in-law (married to Lady Fatima); he was the first male to embrace Islam. The Prophet ascribed Imam Ali with historical sayings, such as, “*I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate,*” and “*Whoever considers me his leader, Ali is also his leader.*”[6](#) Imam Ali was recognized for his knowledge, wisdom, bravery, and justice. Many of Imam Ali's traditions and speeches have been preserved in a book called *The Peak of Eloquence* (Nahj al-Balagha).

## **2. Imam Hassan ibn Ali.**

*Father's name:* Ali ibn Abi Talib.

*Mother's name:* Lady Fatima bint Prophet Muhammad.

*Birth:* Madina, on the 15th Ramadan, 2H (625CE).

*Death:* Died at the age of 46. Poisoned under the direction of Muawiyah, governor of Syria on the 27th of Safar 49H (670CE). Buried in Al-Baqi cemetery, Madina.

Imam Hassan was the eldest son of Imam Ali and Lady Fatima. He devoted himself to the sacred mission of peacefully propagating Islam. He excelled all others in knowledge and spiritual perfection. He resembled the Prophet in forbearance and generosity. For example, the Imam shared beneficence towards a man who was verbally abusing him. The Imam approached the man with a smile and remarked, “*May peace be with you. I think you have just arrived in this town, if you need food, I can provide food for you. If you need clothing, I can provide you with clothing. If you need shelter, I can provide you a place to stay. If you need transportation, I can provide you with a ride, and if you need protection, I can protect you.*”

After hearing this, the man replied, “*I testify that you are the vicegerent of God on earth, and God knows better of whom to entrust with the divine message.*”

## **3. Imam Husayn ibn Ali.**

*Father's name:* Ali ibn Abi Talib.

*Mother's name:* Lady Fatima bint Prophet Muhammad.

*Birth:* Madina, on the 3rd of Shaban 3H (626CE).

*Death:* Martyred at the age of fifty-eight in Karbala (Iraq), by the ruling army of Yazid ibn Muawiyah, on the 10th of Muharram, 61H (680CE) and buried there.

Imam Husayn devoted most of his life to following the footsteps of his father and grandfather. During the

time of the Umayyad Dynasty, corruption and mischief prevailed. Imam Husayn took it upon himself to oppose the authoritative regime of Yazid. By the invitation of the people of Iraq, Imam Husayn left his home in Madina and journeyed to Kufa with his family and companions.

Before reaching Kufa, about sixty miles south of Baghdad, on the plains of Karbala, Imam Husayn was unfairly surrounded by Yazid's mass army and ultimately, on the 10th of Muharram Imam Husayn, his family, and companions were massacred in an unequal battle. This day is known in the Islamic history as the "Day of Ashura." The battle of Karbala represents the battle between truth and falsehood, good and evil, justice and injustice, and oppression and freedom.

Consequentially, the Imam became the beacon of light for the freedom of all Muslims. His martyrdom shook the foundations of the Muslim nation and stirred the consciousness of the people. Numerous revolutions and revolts followed Imam Husayn's martyrdom until the empire of Bani Umayyad collapsed. Ashura still plays a very significant role in the life of Muslims today, in that the sacrifices of the martyrs symbolize the endeavor to fight injustice and deviation for all times and societies.

#### **4. Imam Ali ibn al-Husayn.**

*Father's name:* Husayn ibn Ali.

*Mother's name:* Lady Shah-Zanan, daughter of Yazdeger III, King of Persia.

*Birth:* Madina, on the 15th of Jamada al-Awal, 36H (659CE).

*Death:* Died at the age of fifty-eight. Poisoned by Walid ibn Abdil Malik ibn Marwan on the 25th of Muharram, 95H (713CE). Buried in Al-Baqi cemetery, Madina.

He was known for his consistent worshipping and spiritual perfection in helping the needy. He used to carry bags of flour and bread on his back for the poor and needy families in Madina. He left behind many legacies of spiritual guidance, prayers, and supplications. Collections of his edited prayers are known as "Az-Zabur" (*The Psalm of Al Muhammad*). Whenever a needy person approached him for help the Imam would say, "Welcome to those who carry for my supplies to the next life."

#### **5. Imam Muhammad al-Baqir.**

*Father's name:* Ali Zaynul Abidin.

*Mother's name:* Lady Fatima bint Hassan.

*Birth:* Madina, on the 3rd of Safar 57H (676CE).

*Death:* Died at the age of fifty-seven. Poisoned by the ruler Hisham ibn Abdel Malik ibn Marwan, on the 7th of Dhul al-Hijah, 124H (733CE). Buried in Al-Baqi cemetery, Madina.

A man of great virtue and extensive knowledge, Imam al-Baqir established the foundation of a grand university in Islamic studies in Madina. His pupils compiled books on different branches of science,

jurisprudence, and arts under his instruction and guidance. A distinguished scholar from Makkah, ibn Ata, once described him by saying, *“I never saw other scholars look as small as they did in the presence of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir.”* One of his students, Muhammad ibn Muslim said, *“I asked al-Baqir all the questions that came to my mind (30,000 questions over a period of time), and he competently answered them all.”*

## **6. Imam Jafar as-Sadiq.**

*Father's name:* Muhammad al-Baqir.

*Mother's name:* Lady Fatima bint al-Qasim.

*Birth:* Madina, on the 17th of Rabi al-Awwal, 83H (702 CE).

*Death:* Died at the age of sixty-five. Poisoned by Abu Jaffar al-Mansur, the Abbasid caliph on the 25th of Shawwal 148H (765CE). Buried in Al-Baqi cemetery, Madina.

Imam as-Sadiq's father taught him the science of religion and the teachings of Islam. He became an authority for scholars and preachers and an expert in jurisprudence. After the martyrdom of his father, Imam as-Sadiq transformed the Prophet's mosque in Madina into a university from which to teach and expand Islamic theology. Imam Jafar graduated hundreds of scholars who were versed in Islamic science and traditions of the Prophet.

He also taught some of the founders of the various Islamic schools of jurisprudence. Scholars and preachers gave testimony, acknowledging Imam as-Sadiq's great knowledge of Islam. One scholar, Sibt ibn al-Jawzi said, *“Never have I seen scholars less knowledgeable in the presence of a man like Jafar as-Sadiq.”* Men of knowledge and piety recognized the characteristics of Imam as-Sadiq in leadership, scholarship, and as an unprecedented educator. The Imam was also a great social personality and an effective political force.

Imam as-Sadiq narrated thousands of traditions (*hadiths*), regarding every facet of life. He extensively discussed Islamic ethics, mannerisms, integrity, goodness of character, and acts of worship. Additionally, he discussed jurisprudence and debated with leaders from various Islamic schools of thought.

## **7. Imam Musa al-Kadhim.**

*Father's name:* Imam Jafar as-Sadiq.

*Mother's name:* Lady Um-Hamida.

*Birth:* Abwa (an area between Makkah and Madina) on the 7th of Safar 128H (746CE).

*Death:* Poisoned on the 25th of Rajab, 183H (799CE), Baghdad.

Imam al-Kadhim was the most knowledgeable person of Islam during his time, and he was mostly known for his long prostrations to God. He was known as “al-Kadhim” for showing his extreme patience

and forbearance, due to his resistance against the tyranny of the Abbasid Caliph, Harun. He was imprisoned for fourteen years in a hostile environment in Basra and Baghdad, where he was eventually murdered.

## **8. Imam Ali ar-Rida.**

*Father's name:* Imam Musa al-Kadhim.

*Mother's name:* Lady Najma.

*Birth:* Madina on 11th of Dhul al-Qadah, 148H (765CE).

*Death:* Poisoned by the Abbassid Caliph on the last day of Safar, 203H (818 CE). Buried in Mashad.

Imam ar-Rida was summoned by the Abbassid Caliph, Mamoon, to the province of Khorasan to be crowned a prince as an attempt to quell the resistance of the caliph's dynasty. The Imam initially refused; yet, he was then threatened with death. The Imam accepted conditionally, but he was eventually murdered.

## **9. Imam Muhammad al-Jawad.**

*Father's name:* Imam Ali ar-Rida.

*Mother's name:* Lady Subaika.

*Birth:* Madina, on the 10th of Rajab 195H (811CE).

*Death:* Poisoned by the Caliph, Al-Mutasim, in the city of Baghdad on the last day of Dhul al-Qadah 220H (835CE).

At a very young age Imam al-Jawad was engaged in interfaith dialogue with the scholars of his time. Consequently, he became known among the people for his vast knowledge of Islam.

## **10. Imam Ali al-Hadi.**

*Father's name:* Muhammad al-Jawad.

*Mother's name:* Lady Samanah.

*Birth:* Madina on the 15th of Dhul al-Hijah, 202H (827CE).

*Death:* Poisoned on the 3rd of Rajab, 254H (868CE). Buried in Samarah.

During his time, Imam Ali al-Hadi remarkably surpassed others in human perfection, moral qualities, and generosity. He was summoned by the Abbasid Caliph, Al-Mutawakil to the city of Samarah, which housed the military barricade of the Abbasid Dynasty. There Imam al-Hadi was placed under house arrest. He was subsequently murdered.

## 11. Imam Hassan al-Askari.

*Father's name:* Ali al-Hadi.

*Mother's name:* Lady Jiddh.

*Birth:* The 10th of al-Rabi al-Thani, 232H (846CE).

*Death:* Poisoned by the caliph of his time on the 8th of Rabi al-Awal 260H (874CE) in the city of Samarah.

Imam al-Askari physically and spiritually resembled his great grandfather, the Prophet. The Christians of the time looked upon him as sharing the same qualities as Prophet Jesus.

## 12. Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi.

*Father:* Imam Hassan al-Askari.

*Mother:* Lady Nurgis.

*Birth:* Samarah on 15th of Shaban 255H (869CE) to the present day.

Imam al-Mahdi is the last of the *imams*, and it is with him that the line of succession to the Prophet Muhammad ends. Islamic schools of thought agree that at the end of time Imam al-Mahdi will reappear to make justice prevail on earth after it being overwhelmed with injustice and tyranny. The idea that humanity will be saved is not peculiar to the Islamic faith. It is also shared by other religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. Although the concept of Imam al-Mahdi to be still alive after nearly thirteen centuries seems unconceivable by some, the Quran sets several examples of prophets who are still currently living, such as Jesus and Elijah.<sup>7</sup>

The Quran also gives two other examples in the story of the “companions of the cave”<sup>8</sup> and Uzayr.<sup>9</sup> The continuous existence of Imam al-Mahdi is considered one of the miracles of God, and Muslims believe in it as part of the unseen world.<sup>10</sup> Imam al-Mahdi, still lives in this world by the will of God, but he does not live in public view. However, toward the end of human civilization, when the world is filled with evil and injustice, Imam al-Mahdi will appear to restore order and allow justice to prevail.

### ● **Fatima al-Zahra.**

*Father's name:* Prophet Muhammad.

*Mother's name:* Lady Khadijah bint Kowailed.

*Birth:* Makkah on the 20th day of Jumaada al-Thaani, <sup>11</sup> (614CE) forty-five years after the birth of the Prophet.

*Death:* On the 3rd of Jumaada al-Thaani 11H (632CE). Buried in Medina.

Although Lady Fatima al-Zahra is not considered as an imam, she is, however, included in this list because of her high status and importance. Lady Fatima was five years old during the advent of Islam.

Although the Prophet had several children, Fatima was his favorite. Fatima and her father, Prophet Muhammad had a unique bond. Aisha, [12](#) one of the wives of the Prophet said, *“I never saw a person who so resembled her father in speech, movements, and gestures more than Fatima, and when she goes to visit her father, he stands, takes her hand, kisses it, and places her in his own seat.”* [13](#) Lady Fatima was loving and spiritually close to her father.

The Prophet once said this about his daughter, *“Fatima is part of me. Whoever angers her angers me, and she is the mother of her father.”* [14](#) Lady Fatima carried the light of the message of the Prophet to the generations that were to come through her offspring [imams]. A chapter in the Quran was revealed about her: [15](#)

**Verily, We have granted you [Prophet Muhammad] al-Kawthar. [16](#) Therefore, turn in prayer to your Lord and sacrifice for Him. And he who makes you angry—he will be cut off from offspring.**

Lady Fatima was married to Imam Ali and had four children: Hassan, Husayn, Zaynab, and Um Kalthoum. Lady Fatima was the perfect example of virtue and righteousness; an exemplary woman in Islam. Lady Fatima set many examples in her social and political life. A few days after the demise of the Prophet, Lady Fatima died at the young age of eighteen.

## [The Family of the Prophet \(Ahlul-Bayt\)](#)

*Ahlul-Bayt* refers to the immediate family members of the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter, Fatima, cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and grandchildren, Hassan and Husayn. The purity of Ahlul-Bayt is spoken of in the Quran, **“Allah only wishes to remove all uncleanness from you, O People of the House (Ahlul-Bayt), and to make you as pure as possible”** (33:33). Like the prophets, these five members and the nine descendant imams from Husayn are referred to as Ahlul-Bayt. They are all considered infallible.

Near the end of Prophet Muhammad's life he said:

*It is probable that I will be called soon, and I will respond. So I leave behind me, among you, two weighty things: the Book of God [the Quran], and my Ahlul-Bayt. Verily, God, the Merciful, the Aware, has informed me that these two will never be separated from each other until they meet me at the fountain in Heaven called Kawthar.* [17](#)

The Prophet also said:

*The parable of my Ahlul-Bayt is similar to that of Noah's ark. Whoever embarks on it will certainly be rescued, but whoever opposes the boarding of it will surely be drowned.* [18](#)

As a statute, the prophets of God did not ask any reward for the pain and suffering they endured while attempting to guide humankind. In fact, this refusal to accept compensation can be seen as a mark of a prophet. The Quran states, **“Obey those who ask no reward from you and who have themselves**

**received guidance” (36:21).**

However, by the command of Allah, Prophet Muhammad made one slight exception; although the Prophet refused to accept anything for himself, he was commanded to say, **“I do not ask you for any reward except love for my relatives [the Ahlul-Bayt]” (42:23).**

Imam Ali spoke about Ahlul-Bayt:

*We, the Ahlul-Bayt, possess the doors of wisdom and light of governance. Beware that the paths of religion are one and its highways are straight. He who follows them achieves and secures the aim and objective. And he who stands away from them goes astray and incurs repentance.* [19](#)

The example of the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad is like that of stars in the sky; *“When one star sets another one rises.”* [20](#)

*We are lights of the heavens and the earth and the ships of salvation. We are the repositories of knowledge, and toward us is the homecoming of all matters. Through our Mahdi (the final successor to the Prophet) all arguments shall be refuted, and he is the seal of the imams, the deliverer of the Muslim nation (ummah), and the extremity of the light. Happy are those who hold onto our handle and are brought together upon our love.* [21](#)

[1.](#) Bukhari, The Book of Ahkam (Laws), v.1 p.101; Muslim, Kitab al-Imaara (The Book of Leadership), v.1 narrations 4–6.

[2.](#) Ibn means “son of.”

[3.](#) Bint means “daughter of.”

[4.](#) BH stands for “before Hijrah.”

[5.](#) H stands for “Hijrah.”

[6.](#) Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, 4: 281; Al-Tabari, 2: 169.

[7.](#) See Quran 18:60–82.

[8.](#) See Quran 18:25.

[9.](#) See Quran 2:259.

[10.](#) See Quran 2:3.

[11.](#) Jumaada al-Thaani is the sixth month of the Islamic calendar.

[12.](#) Aisha, daughter of Abu Bakr (the first caliph), and one of the wives of the Prophet.

[13.](#) Feiruz Abadi, Fadhaail al-Khamsa, v.3 p.127.

[14.](#) Bukhari, v.2 p.185; Usud al-Ghaaba, v.5 p.520.

[15.](#) Quran 108, Al-Kawthar.

[16.](#) Kawthar is one of the names of Lady Fatima, as well as the name of a river in Paradise.

[17.](#) Sahih Muslim, v.2 p.238 and Sahih Tirmithi, v.II p.220.

[18.](#) Mishkaat al-Masaabih, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, p.523 and Faraid al-Simtayn, v.2 p.242.

[19.](#) Nahj al-Balagha (The Peak of Eloquence), sermon 120.

[20.](#) Nahj al-Balagha (The Peak of Eloquence), sermon 100.

[21.](#) Sibt ibn al-Jawzi, Tadhkirat al-Khawass, p.138.

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