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Establishment of Majalis to commemorate the events of Karbala'

The Eighth Imam, 'Ali Ibn Musa, Al-Ridha' (as)

Born in Madina 11th Zeeqaad 148 Hijri (1.1.766 AD). Died in the city of Tus Iran on 17th Safar 203 Hijri (26.5.819 AH) Period of Imamate 20 years.

His grandfather Imam Ja'far Al-sadiq (as) died one month before the birth of Imam Ridha' (as) The family must have been consoled by his birth which took place after such a great loss. He was brought up and instructed by his affectionate father under whose supervision he passed his boyhood and youth. He availed himself of the instructions of his learned father for thirty one years, till the later was taken to Baghdad to suffer the hardship of imprisonment for four years till his death.

Imam Musa Ibn Ja'far (as) could foresee that the hostile Abbasid ruler would not allow him to live peacefully and circumstances would take such a turn that his followers would not be able to see him or enquire about his successor prior to his death.

So while free and undisturbed in Madinah he felt the need to introduce his successor to his followers. He, therefore, assembled seventeen prominent dignitaries from the descendants of Imam 'Ali (as) and proclaimed that his son 'Ali Ibn Musa (as) would succeed him.

He also wrote his will on which 60 respected elders of Madinah signed as witnesses. Such elaborated arrangements were never made by any other Imam and they proved to be most appropriate due to the controversy about the Imamate which ensued after the death of Imam Musa Ibn Ja'far (as) .

Imam Ridha' (as) was 35 years old when his father died in prison of Harun al-Rashid in Baghdad and the responsibilities of the Imamate devolved on him. At that time Harun Al-Rashid was the absolute ruler of Baghdad and the descendants of Imam 'Ali (as) were passing as ever, through trials and tribulations because of the tyranny of the Abbasid ruler.

Yet Imam Ridha' (as) carried on the responsibility of administering the Divine Law of Shari'ah as taught by the Holy Prophet and Imams of the Ahlul Bayt after him.

After putting an end to the life of Imam Musa Ibn Jaa'far (as) Harun al-Rashid lived for ten years. He

had less tolerance for the existence of Imam 'Ali Ridha' (as) , then he did for his revered father. But he also knew that his Government had already lost face due to its prolonged maltreatment and eventual assassination of Imam Musa Ibn Ja'far (as) or perhaps the tyrant felt the stings of conscience which kept him from harassing the 8th Imam.

It is said that once Yahya Barmaki, his Prime Minister, in order to gain the ruler's favor, informed Harun that Imam 'Ali Ibn Musa (as) claimed Imamate in the same way his father had done, Harun coldly replied, "We have already inflicted cruelties on his father, do you expect me to annihilate this family altogether.

Still, Harun was antagonistic towards the Prophet's descendants and persisted in maltreatment of most of them in Madina. The local Governors of Madina who wished to please the ruler could not afford to be fair to Ahlul Bayt. People could not visit the Imam freely seek his knowledge, and he had little chance to teach his followers openly, for the eyes of the agents of Caliph focused unceasingly on the activities of the Imam.

Political wranglings in Baghdad between the two sons of Harun were rocking the Empire. His elder son Amin who had an Arab mother had the support of the Arabs and most of the Abbasid elders, while the younger son Mamun had a Persian mother and was supported by the Persians.

To console both factions Harun took a pledge from both his sons that after his death Amin will rule the Arab part of the Empire while Mamun will rule the Persian side.

When Harun died in faraway Tus, the most northern town of his Persian Empire, Mamun was with him and buried him there. Amin in Baghdad immediately proclaimed himself the Caliph of the whole empire and immediately deposed Mamun from the rulership of the Persian Province. Mamun's main concern was to subdue the Persian province under any circumstances.

He realized that the majority of Persians favored the teachings of Ahlul Bayt and if somehow he could persuade the Imam of the Ahlul Bayt in Madina to side with him, he could confirm his rule there. Once he felt secure on that side of the Empire, he would then rise against his brother and easily depose him.

So the orders were sent out for the Imam to leave his home in Madina and go to the Abbasid ruler in faraway Tus. Imam, as if by some miracle knew what was to come. So he left his wife and only son Muhammad Ibn 'Ali al Jawad, later known as Imam Muhammad Taqi (as) in Madina.

He also called many elders of Madina mostly from Banu Hashim and told them of his call to go to the outpost of the Empire to see Mamun. The date of his departure was in the month of Rajab 200 Hijri. It was a long journey to Merve and the Imam set out on this momentous journey with some of his friends who were loyal to him throughout his life.

His journey began from Madina to Makka where he performed the Umra, then he took almost the same

route as Imam Husayn (as) took in 61 hijri towards Karbala'. Half way through the hills of Hejaz when he crossed over to the desert of Najd his route changed to that of Imam Husayn (as) and his caravan moved towards the eastern side and reached the town of Basra in the month of Shawwal.

From Basra he crossed over the Shatt-al-Arab and reached the Persian soil heading towards the town of Qum. It was in the month of Zilhijja that he reached Qum where he stayed for a while. The month of Muharram the 8th Imam spent in Qum where it is said that he established for the first time a Majlis to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (as).

This was the first Muharram in 201 Hijri that set the tradition of Majlis, beginning in Persia the way the Imams of Ahlul Bayt had wanted it and the way it was observed in Madina and Makka and throughout the province of Hejaz and Najd and to some extent in Iraq where people thronged for pilgrimage to the Shrine of Imam Husayn (as) .

After spending the Month of Muharram in Qum the Imam proceeded towards the northern part of Persia crossing the Alburz mountains to the town of Merv where Mamun had settled with his army to secure his empire for him.

It is thought in some historical circles that the 8th Imam involved himself in politics while his ancestors up to the 7th Imam after the martyrdom of Imam 'Ali (as) refrained from this journey. Outwardly it looks like the Imam was abandoning the policy of his predecessors for the Imam could not be the heir- apparent to the caliphate without becoming involved in the politics of the day.

The Imam took pains, however, to indicate that it was not his desire, but that he was acting only in accord with the summons he had received from Mamun. He seemed to have no choice but to proceed on this hazardous journey.

Indeed if he had refused to proceed or shown any reluctance, force would surely have been used which would have been more humiliating for the Imam and his family.

Yakubi in his history gave some details of this journey. From Qum the Imam moved north to the town of al-ray, the Greek Rhages, which is near the site of the present city of Tehran. From this place the caravan continued its journey until it reached the city of Tus. From Tus they travelled on to the city of Merv, in what is now modern Turkistan.

On his arrival in Merv, Mamun welcomed him with great ceremony and pomp. Mamun treated the Imam with great honor.

It is mentioned by various historians, Both of Shia and Sunni schools of thought, that when Mamun initially offered the Imam his throne, the Imam declined the offer firmly and resolutely. After several attempts to bring the Imam to accept the offer failed, Mamun told him to accept the offer of being his heir- apparent to succeed him after Mamun's death.

Imam replied to this offer, “ I will accept this to console you, but this will never happen for I will leave this world before you.” Once Mamun achieved his desire to get the consent of the Imam as his successor, he declared this openly to all in order to see the reaction of the Abbasid clan who were favoring his half-brother Amin.

According to Yakubi it was on the 27th of Ramadan, in the year 201 Hijri that the Imam was officially designated as Mamun’s “heir- apparent,”(Wali’ahd,) and the Imam’s name was included with his own on gold and silver coins. The inscription on these coins is well worthy of notice: “The King of God and the faith, Al-Mamun, Amir and Khalifa of the faithful, and Al-Ridha’, the Imam of the Muslims.”

This meant more than that the Imam was to be official chaplain to him for Mamun summoned the descendants of Abbas, men and women to come to Merv. It was an assembly of thirty three thousand and when they all assembled, the caliph Mamun called for ‘Ali al- Ridha’ (as) and gave him a place of honor among the greatest of the Abbasid nobles.

He then announced to those he had summoned, that he had carefully considered all the descendants of Abbas and also the descendants of ‘Ali, and that he had not found in his search anyone more worthy or more fit to be his successor than ‘Ali al- Ridha’.

He therefore took him by the hand and publicly acknowledged him as his successor(Kulaini). He then gave his daughter Umme Habib in marriage. He also sent abroad the command that the wearing of black flags which was the symbol of Abbasid rule after the destruction of the Ummayyads, should be discontinued and that hereafter the use of green should be substituted. Green being the color of Ahlul Bayt and the House of ‘Ali (as) was the order of the day.

Once this story of succession was announced Mamun’s political ambition was achieved. He secured the help of the Persians fully behind him. With their help his army invaded the capital of the Abbasid empire, Baghdad, Amin was killed and his head was sent to Mamun to see for himself that he had become the sole ruler of the Abbasid Empire.

But Mamun was still not secure on his throne. The Arab party who sided with Amin, never liked the appointment of Imam ‘Ali al- Ridha’ (as) as the successor of Mamun, no matter how dubious it looked to them on the face of it.

The chiefs of the Abbasid family in Iraq perceived that by this appointment the principal authority in the empire would very likely be taken from them. They got together, therefore, and proclaimed that for bequeathing the Caliphate after his death to the Imam ‘Ali Al-Ridha’ (as), who was not their immediate family, Mamun himself was declared deposed.

They swore allegiance to Ibrahim al Mehdi, Mamun’s uncle as their new caliph. This proclamation took place on the 5th of Muharram 202 Hijri.

While Imam Ridha' was with Mamun in Merv, his Prime Minister Fadl ibn Sahl arranged a conference on religions to which he invited the leaders of different sects, including Zoroastrians and Christians and Jews, that they might hear what the Imam of the Ahlul Bayt had to say to impress them of their spiritual abilities and excellences.

It was in these discussions with leaders of other faiths that the Imam clarified the position of sinlessness of the Prophets and of the guided Imams. These conferences were so successful that at one stage Mamun was fearful of the increasing influences of the Imam on the people as a whole.

In one such incidence on the occasion of the Eidul Fitr, the whole strategy of Mamun and the sheer hypocrisy of the drama he was playing was exposed. He had asked the Imam to lead the Eidul Fitr prayers at the end of Ramadan that year. First the Imam declined, but when Mamun insisted, he agreed on the condition that he will direct the occasion as he would deem fit.

On the morning of the Eidul Fitr, when the military and civil leaders assembled outside the door of the Imam to come out and lead the prayers, they saw the Imam come out of the house bare foot, wearing a white shirt and white headgear. Imam also advised his companions to follow him in the same manner. He came out on the Road to the mosque outside the city of Merv.

All the citizens who saw the Imam in this fashion copied him and all walked barefoot. Even the military chiefs and civil judges walked bare foot. A huge crowd followed the Imam. He was saying Takbir loudly and all were following him and shouting Takbir (God is great).

The situation became so tense that when Mamun was informed of this huge following of the Imam he immediately sent a request to the Imam to withdraw from leading the Eid prayers. Imam withdrew and it was a great show down for the Emperor and exposed his trickery to the full.

It was after about a year's stay of the Imam in Merv that Mamun decided to do something about the situation in Iraq. He knew that his uncle Ibrahim al Mehdi had been proclaimed as Caliph there in his place. This was a thorn in his heart.

He decided that it was time for him to return from Khorasan and assert his rights in person. He had already strengthened his position due to the help of the Persians. With a huge army beside him Mamun prepared his journey back home.

He was accompanied, as Yakubi mentions it in his history, by Imam al Ridha' (as) as his heir apparent and by his prime minister Fadl ibn Sahl, who was known as the holder of two offices, civil and military, being the Prime Minister as well as the chief of the Army.

But when they reached the town of Sarakhs, Fadl ibn Sahl was assassinated in his bath by two persons, Ghalib al Rumi and Sarraj al Khadim. They were found out by Mamun who immediately put them to death immediately that if there was any implication of Mamun in this murder it should not be exposed.

Mamun had his suspicions about his Prime Minister who was secretly gaining favor with the Abbasids in Baghdad. Historians did mention the name of Mamun in disposing off Fadhl ibn Sahl.

Within two days of this murder when the army reached the town of Tus, Imam Ridha' fell ill and died within three days of his illness. Yakubi reported that "his sickness was no more than three days and it was reported that Ibn Hisham, Mamun's favorite henchman had given the Imam poison which caused his death.

He mixed poison in grapes and when Imam had eaten the grapes he became ill in the same manner as Imam Hasan did and died within three days."

Ibn Babawaih relates various reasons that have been assigned to Mamun for poisoning the Imam and shows also the circumstances in which Imam 'Ali Ridha' (as) is said to have designated his son Muhammad ibn 'Ali as his successor to the Imamate.

Imam 'Ali Ridha' (as) died and was buried far off from Madina, the home of his forefathers of the Ahlul Bayt of the Prophet. In Sanabad, about a mile from the village where he died, they placed him in a grave inside the tomb of Harun al- Rashid who was buried there ten years ago.

Mamun's ambitions to get the Empire under his feet was almost accomplished for he knew that the army under his command would not run away from him at this juncture. So he cleverly killed off the Imam and reached Baghdad with the declaration that the Caliphate of Banu Abbas would remain in the family. Ibrahim al Mehdi was deposed and later killed and Mamun became the supreme leader.

Imam's Conduct

Usually, the poor who cannot afford to enjoy the pleasures of life are held in contempt or just tolerated by the society. But those who assume a hermits' simple austerity in spite of wealth and power are the real saints.

The Ahlul Bayt of the Prophet adopted a peculiar policy. Those whose means were limited dressed nicely because otherwise their adversaries would taunt them as destitutes which would injure the dignity of their piety.

But blessed were those who by chance became wealthy, and who assumed simplicity and austerity so their simple life became a source of consolation for the poor and a model for the rich. This can be illustrated from the life of Imam 'Ali (as) . For nearly five years he ruled the Muslim world as caliph. He ate and dressed himself as a hermit would.

Imam 'Ali al- Ridha' (as) too, led a simple life, though he was the heir- apparent of the vast Arab Empire compared to which the Roman Empire or the Persian territories would certainly not be a match. A vast chain of countries whose caliph's upon watching a passing cloud, would arrogantly assert: "Go and pour

your waters anywhere you please; the revenues of that land shall ultimately be brought to us”.

The appointment of Imam ‘Ali al –Ridha’ (as) as heir apparent demonstrated to the world how the saints fare when the treasures of the world are put at their feet. He felt he was morally bound to abandon riches and pomp. History repeated itself, and the austerity of Imam ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) once more was shown in the calm and content personality of Imam ‘Ali Al–Ridha’ (as).

He did not like to decorate his house with expensive carpets, instead he covered its floor with rough mats during the winter and grass mats during the summer. When food was served, he would call all his servants, including the gatekeeper to sit and eat with him.

Majlisi in Biharul Anwar V 49 Page 101, writes that our 8th Imam insisted on eating his meals only after the entire members of his family, young and old, servants and grooms were present. One day someone who was fonder of royal formalities than the fraternity of the Ahlul Bayt, suggested that it would be better to make separate eating arrangements for the servants, The Imam replied, "All are created by God, Adam is their father and Eve is their mother. Everyone will be dealt with by God according to his deeds. Why should there be any discrimination in this world."

Imam ‘Ali Al–Ridha’ (as) life contains countless anecdotes of this sort. Once a man said to him, "By God, there is none who is superior to you in the nobleness of your ancestry." The Imam said to him, "My ancestors are honored merely for their Godliness, piety and worship." Another man once declared, "By God, you are the best in the world."

The Imam checked him by saying: "Don't you declare an oath. Any man who is more pious than me can be better than me." Imam several times declared the Hadith of the Prophet that a black negro slave can be better than a person from my own family if his deeds are better.

Establishment of Majalis to commemorate the events of Karbala’

As mentioned earlier, when Imam ‘Ali Al–Riza was on his journey to Khorasan he stayed in the city of Qom for a few months and there he established these commemorative Majalis. In Tus where he stayed for over a year as heir apparent to the Emperor, Imam re-established these Majalis there too. This tradition was initiated by Imam Muhammad al Baqir (as) and then continued by the 6th Imam. But during those times, only those who came to visit the Imams in their homes were narrated these stories.

But Imam ‘Ali Al–Ridha’ (as) was respected both as Imam and heir apparent. Merv, the capital and a central city of Persia of that time, was the meeting place of people from all walks of life and from all corners of the earth. As soon as the crescent of Muharram was sighted, Majalis of Karbala’ began. Everybody was expected to recite the sad events that befell the Prophet’s descendants and maintain a serious atmosphere of sorrow and grief.

Imam himself convened these Majalis in which he recited first, then allowed others to read the story of

Karbala'. Abdallah ibn Thabit and D'bil al Khuzai were the poets who asked to recite poems narrating the tragic events.

At the end of such a majlis the Imam bestowed on the poet a costly shirt. The humble poet refused to accept such a precious gift, requesting that the Imam be gracious to grant him his used shirt instead. The good natured saint insisted on granting him both shirts, the new one and his own old shirt.

This incident proves two things: First, that the speaker in these majalis must not decide or demand any payment for his address, second that if the convener presents something as a gift or payment, the speaker may accept it.

To get an insight into the lives and activities of the Imam, let me give a few anecdotes from the pages of history to establish his manner and his behavior with other people.

One day a man approached the Imam and said, " I am one of your followers and have love for the Ahlul Bayt of the Prophet. I am now returning from pilgrimage to Makka and I am now penniless and have no money to return home.

If you think it proper, please give me enough money so that I can reach home. After reaching home, I will give the same amount to the poor in your name. I am not poor at home, it is during my travels that I have spent more than I should have and become penniless.

Imam got up, and went inside the house. He then called the man to the door, extended his hand from behind the curtain and handed him the required amount, saying, "Take these two hundred Dinars. These are your travel expenses, and may this bring you the blessings of God. There is no need to give equivalent money to the poor but if you feel you must then you may give it to the orphans and the widows of your town."

The man took the money and left. The Imam came out from behind the curtain and resumed his seat. People asked, "Why did you adopt such a way that the man could not see you while you were giving the money." Imam replied, " I did not want to see the shame of supplication on his face." (Ayoun Akhbar al Riza)

Mohammed ibn Sinan reports that during the caliphate of Haroun, they once warned the Imam about declaring his Imamate as the caliph would try to harm him. The Imam replied, " What gave me courage are the words of the Prophet when he said, " If Abu Jehl can harm even a hair of my head, then be witness that I am not the messenger of God."

And I say that " if Haroun can harm even a hair of my head, then be witness that I am not a true Imam." (Kafi)

Abu Salt Harvi reports that Imam left Nishapur and reached a village called Din-Surkh, it was the time of Zohr prayers. Imam descended from the horse he was travelling and asked for water to perform the Zohr

prayers. No water was found. Then the Imam with his holy hands dug some earth and a spring gushed out. Imam and all his companions performed the wuzu.

This place near Nishapur is now called Qadamgah. It is a small hillock. The spring still gushes and people who visit this place drink from the spring for blessing and for obtaining cures from sickness and skin diseases. The place preserves the Holy foot prints of the Imam on a black stone. (Akhbar al Riza)

One of the famous sayings of Imam 'Ali Al-Riza is,

“ This world is a prison for a momin and a paradise for the unbeliever.”

This means that a true believer always aspires to leave this prison of his body and his Nafs and Ruh wants to get away to the nearness of God, but those who do not believe have nothing further than their mortal lives and they aspire to make it a paradise.

But in the process they create their own hell on earth for their aspirations are never ending desires for accumulating material wealth.

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