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## The Tenth Infallible, Hadhrat Imam 'Ali b. Musa al-Ridha, The Eighth Imam

The tenth Infallible and the eighth Imam of the Shi'a, Imam 'Ali b. Musa, was named as al-Ridha (as).

Imam al-Ridha (as) was born on Dhu'l-Qa'da 11, 148/December 29, 765 in Medina. His honorable mother was Tuktam who was also called Najmah.

When the seventh Imam (as) was martyred in Baghdad prison, 'Ali b. Musa al-Ridha (as) took over the Imamate and leadership of the Muslims as well as the guardianship and promulgation of the Islamic *Ma'arif* and truth at the age of 35 by Allah's command and his noble ancestors' appointment.

At the beginning of his Imamate, Imam Abu al-Hasan 'Ali b. Musa al-Ridha (as) was contemporary with Harun al-Rashid and later on with his son, Amin, and finally with Ma'mun.

The holy Imam's residence was in Medina, wherefrom his holiness later on left for Iraq and Iran.

The Imamate of his holiness lasted 20 years, of which the first 10 years coincided with the caliphate of Harun, the next 5 years with that of Amin and the last part with the caliphate of Ma'mun in Khurasan. His Martyrdom is recorded to have happened in 203/818, indicating that he lived to the age of 55.

After Harun's death, a severe conflict erupted between his two sons, Amin and Ma'mun, eventually leading to bloody fighting. Amin was killed and an apparent peace was established. This way, Ma'mun could take over the rule and dominate over the Islamic lands.

The Abbasid caliphs were very antagonistic toward 'Ali (a.s.)'s household, i.e. the 'Alawi Sadat. Frequent uprisings by the 'Alawi Sadat would sporadically threaten the ruling system. Although the noble Imams (as) and the real successors of the Holy Prophet (S) would not go along with these uprisings, but the caliphs who had spread out and cherished an aristocratic and hedonistic way of life, were weakened and alarmed by these uprisings.

Followers of the pure Imams (as) who were rapidly increasing in number detested the aristocratic ruling system of the Abbasids and held obeisance to the Infallible Imams (as) as obligatory.

The injustice and tyranny by Harun and other Abbasid caliphs had also caused the Iranians to acquire a very deep and hearty liking for 'Ali (as)'s household. Among the Abbasid's atrocities was that Harun had given his governor, Humaid b. Qahtaba, full authority to assassinate the Shi'as and the followers of 'Ali (as)'s household wherever he might find them. This ruthless and bestial governor brutally beheaded sixty innocent and respectful Shi'as in the prison overnight and dropped their bodies down into a well.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

Similarly, the same governor incarcerated 'Abd Allah Aftas, Imam al-Ridha (as)'s brother, in the time of Harun and ordered his son, Yahya, to be given a hundred lashes every day although apparently he was granted a respite. And finally, they had Yahya, grandson of Imam Musa b. Ja'far (as), starved to death and buried his body under the foundation of a building.<sup>[2](#)</sup> These atrocities made people more disgusted with the Abbasid caliphate.

Although at first it was supposed that the Abbasids were attempting to promulgate Islam and love of and friendship with 'Ali (as)'s progeny who were their cousins and kin, but gradually and in practice it so happened that the simplicity of the life of the Holy Prophet (S) and the early caliphs, equality, brotherhood, justice, and belief in piety and virtue and the Day of Judgment began to be forgotten and ignored among the Abbasids as it did among the Umayyads before them.

As a result, the pagan beliefs and aristocracy were revived under the guise of pretension as Muslims. Consequently, the noble Imams (as), who followed in the footsteps of the Holy Apostle (S) and their pure ancestors and who were in all instances the advocates of Justice and truth and actualization of the Islamic ideals in the society, were actually living under torture and persecution and under the surveillance of spies and tyrannical rulers of the pretentious Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs. Having piety, knowledge and virtue was considered sinful for our great leaders who were greatly envied and hated by the Abbasid caliphs.

## **Why was Imam al-Ridha (as) Invited to Khurasan?**

When Amin was defeated and killed – with the help of Ma'mun's Persian advocates – the way was paved for his rule. In the era of Harun, Ma'mun who was supposed to accede to the throne after his brother Amin, had already been appointed as the governor of Khurasan. When Amin was driven out of the scene of caliphate, Ma'mun occupied the vacant seat and transferred the center of caliphate from Baghdad to Merv.

In order to add scholarly grandeur and status to his court and on the other hand, reduce voices of dissent from the advocates of 'Ali (as)'s household and compensate the atrocities he had committed in the past, Ma'mun decided to invite Imam al-Ridha (as) to Merv upon consultation with his close companions, especially Fadhl b. Sahl, a smart man who managed the state and military affairs. Ma'mun

asked Imam al-Ridha (as) importunately to go to Merv from Medina.

He had in mind, by this invitation, to reinforce the pillars of his rule and perhaps to discourage the Imam (as)'s position by drawing him to the core of the ruling system. Ma'mun, himself a learned and clever man, was more than anybody else aware of Imam al-Ridha (as)'s vast field of knowledge and piety and virtue. Fadhl b. Sahl, too, knew about the spiritual power of the the Imam (as) and was well-aware that the intuition, purity, and sincerity of the descendant of the Holy Prophet (S) had so widely spread around that people were spiritually prepared to welcome his leadership wholeheartedly.

Having decided to invite the Holy Imam (as), Ma'mun dispatched Raja' b. Abi Dhahhak along with some trusted courtiers to Medina to persuade Imam al-Ridha (as) to travel to Khurasan. At first, Imam al-Ridha (as) did not give his consent to their invitation, letting people infer what secret and covert plans the ruling system was harboring by inviting him.

Finally, upon much insistence from Ma'mun, Imam al-Ridha (as) agreed to leave for Khurasan through Mecca and Iraq. Imam al-Ridha (as) said a heartrending and distressful farewell to the illuminated tomb of his noble ancestor, the Holy Prophet (S), all members of his family, and even his cherished only-child and successor Imam Muhammad al-Taqi al-Jawad (as).

The luxurious camel-litters and the retinue provided by the ruling system together with the entourage consisting of the governor and the nobles of Medina accompanied the Holy Imam (as) with utmost grandeur and splendor to Basra. How was it possible for Ma'mun, who had decided on killing his brother Amin and bringing his head to the capital to hold a festival for rewarding a bounty to the one who would manage to murder the latter, to renounce caliphate and turn it over to 'Ali (as)'s household?! It was unbelievable.

However, everything he apparently did in honor and as homage to Imam al-Ridha (as) was a means to boost his own power and glory in caliphate that was actually the plans and plots carried out by the order from his cunning vizier, Fadhl b. Sahl.

At last, the eighth Imam (as), traveling through Basra, Khurramshar, Ahwaz, Arak, Qum, Rey, and Neyshabur arrived in Merv on Shawwal 10, 201/May 1, 817.

People of all these cities enthusiastically welcomed and appreciated visiting the only descendant of the Holy Apostle (S) and took advantage of this opportunity to seek Imam (as)'s assistance in solving their religious and worldly problems.

## **Hadith Silsilat al-Dhahab in Neyshabur**

### **Hadith Silsilat al-Dhahab (Golden Chain)<sup>3</sup> in Neyshabur**

People of Neyshabur were eagerly looking forward to seeing Imam al-Ridha (as). At his arrival they

asked him to stay on for a while longer so they could better see the charming and dignified countenance of the Prophet (S)'s grandson. Having dressed quite simply, the holy Imam (as) stood before the people.

Upon seeing the Imam (as), those people let out a cheerful chanting. When Imam al-Ridha (as) began to speak, two of the *hadith* memorizers named Abudhar'a and Muhammad b. Aslam bade people to keep silent, and restated the graceful and elegant words of the holy Imam (as) loudly enough for all to hear. Imam al-Ridha (as) expressed a *hadith* regarding the unity and oneness of the Exalted Allah as follows:

“The statement *La illaha illa Allah* is My strong fortress, whoever says it will enter this fortress, and if he enters it, he will be safeguarded from the punishment of the Judgment Day.” And then, when his retinue were about to set off, he looked out of the camel litter. People found out that the Imam (as) intended to say something. Once again silence prevailed, and then Imam al-Ridha (as) concluded the above *hadith* by the following words:

“But yet on some conditions, and I am one of the conditions”.

By this Divine *Hadith*,<sup>4</sup> the holy Imam (as) intended to state three points:

Firstly, by naming his ancestors who had each quoted the *hadith* from the previous ones back to the Holy Prophet (S) who had himself heard it through the trusted Gabriel from the Exalted Lord, he could remind people of his honorable ancestors who were all Shi'ite Imams and rightful Caliphs of the true path.

Secondly, to remind people of monotheism and theology, which are the cornerstones of all beliefs and contentions to avert them from getting duped by illegitimate rulers, *taghuts*, and the tyrannical bullies.

Thirdly, real and non-idolatrous monotheism and theology free from hypocrisy requires and accompanies the *Wilayat* of Ahl al-Bayt (as), and that unless a just leadership is not set up in the Muslims' community, the idols and pseudo-idols and the illegitimate rulers will not allow Divine Unity turn in the right path.

Historically, it is recorded that when writing down this *hadith*, the eager people were so prepared that they had in their disposal 24 thousand pen-holders to be used in writing the precious words of the Holy Prophet (S)'s descendent.<sup>5</sup>

## In Merv

When Imam al-Ridha (as) and his retinue approached Merv, Ma'mun and Fadhl b. Sahl accompanied by a large number of courtiers and state dignitaries marched toward his arrival direction for several kilometers to welcome him.

A few days later, Ma'mun told the Imam (as) what he had in mind, i.e. to hand over his caliphate to Imam al-Ridha (as), having in mind to kill two birds with one stone: both to put an end to the revolt of the 'Alawis against the government or scale it down, and to mar the Holy Imam's (as) spiritual and pious image by bringing him in the ruling system which had always been criticized and protested by Imam 'Ali (a.s.)'s progeny who always regarded the functionaries of the state as corrupt and impure.

He also planned to melt down the religious solidarity of the 'Alawis and the Imam 'Ali (as)'s Shi'ites, so that the caliphate would no longer be endangered. Then Ma'mun and his cronies could carry on the ruling with a free mind.

However, contrary to what Ma'mun and Fadhl b. Sahl and the flattering worldly-minded people expected, Imam al-Ridha (as) refused to accept this offer.

The Holy Imam (as) was well-aware of the Abbasid's corrupt and disorderly ruling system; of the lavish and extravagant largesse which had started since half a century back in the aristocratic Abbasid governance being given away as hush money to certain people; of deviation of the governance from the right path under the guise of Islam and religiousness; and of handing over the crucial Islamic and ruling affairs to corrupt gold-hoarders and hypocrite individuals. How could have a friend of Allah and Infallible Imam tolerated such an unruly and chaotic situation?

The Imam (as) would take over the governance only when he can cut a tyrant's hands off an oppressed person and when he can help the wronged person take back his usurped rights, otherwise he would give up governance and caliphate.

## **Crown Princeship**

When Ma'mun got disappointed of the Imam (as)'s acceptance of the caliphate, he plotted another scheme with the help of his counselors to make him justify his good and evil deeds as righteous with the implied consent of the Imam (as) and thereby deceive the people. What should he do? He had better ask the Imam (as) to accept his crown princeship and, of course, to take over the affairs of Muslims when Ma'mun dies.

The Imam (as), however, did not consent to this proposal, either. What should be done? Upon much insistence, Ma'mun forced the Imam (as) to accept the crown princeship. Imam al-Ridha (as) perforce consented under the condition that he would not interfere in installing or expelling officials and in other state affairs and would leave such kinds of tasks to the relevant authorities and statesmen.

On Ramadan 9, 201/March 31, 817, Ma'mun penned a writing in his own handwriting introducing Imam al-Ridha (as) as a manifestation of purity, piety, learnedness, and chastity; and then added that all Muslims must swear their allegiance first to Amir al-Mu'minin (Ma'mun), and then to 'Ali b. Musa al-Ridha (as).

Imam al-Ridha (as) wrote the following on the back of the Ma'mun's writing: "Praise be to the Lord of the worlds who will do as He wishes to do and there is nobody to avert His decree and commandment. He is aware of the treacheries of the eyes and the secrets hidden in the chests; and Allah's blessing be on Muhammad (S) who is His last of the Messengers and his progeny who are the virtuous and the noble."

Then on Ramadan 10, 201/April 1, 817, all civil and military dignitaries swore allegiance to the Holy Imam (as). From this time on it was ordered that the black colored garment which was a token of the Abbasids to be transformed into the green one, a token of 'Ali (as)'s progeny and the 'Alawi Sadat.

## **The Consequence of Transferring Caliphate and its Tendency Toward the 'Alawis**

The jealous and the world adorers in different parts of the Islamic Empire whose hands were stained with the innocents' blood and who enjoyed well-to-do and luxurious lives were discontent with such a transfer. They knew well that Imam al-Ridha (as) would not tolerate tyranny and oppression for even a single moment.

This 'Ali [b. Musa al-Ridha] (as) is the son of the same 'Ali (as) who did not value the worldly matters and the caliphate, and if he accepted to rule, it was because he regarded it as a means for restoring and carrying out justice, serving the society and the oppressed people, and nothing else.

Therefore, this decisive and invincible method could not satisfy the lovers of worldly gaudiness and the servile flatterers. Ma'mun, his vizier and cronies tried from the very beginning to misrepresent the acceptance of crown princship by Imam al-Ridha (as) as a weak point and convince people that he was infatuated with worldly issues and the superfluous attractions. Far from it! How this way of thinking was far from the sublime goal of the Holy Imam (as).

Anyhow, the sun of truthfulness would not remain under clouds: Imam 'Ali b. Musa al-Ridha (as)'s simplicity and immaculate behavior as well as his vast field of knowledge and scholarship began to gain more and more popularity, and soon his righteousness and comprehensive learnedness were known to all. Debate sessions held in the presence of Ma'mun and others like the well-known court jurist, Yahya b. Aktham, who boasted of being knowledgeable and well-informed, lighted up the reality of *Wilayat* and Imamate.

Throughout these debates, everybody, even the leaders of other religions, found out about the extent of the Imam (as)'s omniscience and insight and realized that they had no power of speech and self-expression against the Prophet (S)'s descendants. That was why they had no choice but to surrender to the Imam (as). Perforce, the enemy's plots to mar the Holy Imam (as)'s status were not only abortive, but they also gave way to a reverse effect.

As an educated and a knowledgeable man, Ma'mun was well-aware of Imam al-Ridha (as)'s spiritual

and scholarly elevated position, but suppressed his inner feelings and views and pretended to be caring and friendly toward the Imam (as).

On the 'Id al-Fitr, 202 A H, Ma'mun implored Imam al-Ridha (as) to lead the congregational prayer. At first, he refused it, so that Ma'mun and his cronies as well as the people might know that he could not and wouldn't act as a puppet doing what the state intended him to do. Besides, the Imam (as) would not like to be a performer of the ostensible formalities of religion, knowing that the building [of religion] was tottering to its foundation.

Ma'mun, his courtiers, and other people insisted on the Imam (a.s.) to lead the prayer, to which he finally consented on the condition that: "I would lead 'Id al-Fitr prayer but only with the same tradition that my ancestor, the Apostle of Allah (S) performed it in his own time." People were very anxious to see that the way of the Prophet (S) would substitute the superfluous ceremony of the court. Ma'mun ordered all courtiers to wear their finest attires, ride on ornamented and gold-bridled horses with all pomp and circumstances to accompany the Imam (as) to participate in 'Id al-Fitr prayer.

Imam al-Ridha (as), however, performed ablution, wore a simple white cotton shirt, put on a white turban, letting its two ends from over his chest down his shoulder, just in the way his noble ancestor did.

He perfumed himself, fastened the tail of his shirt to his waist, and set off bare-footed. When he reached the open land he called out with a loud voice: *Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!* (Allah is the Greatest).

When people heard the Imam (as)'s voice, they began to chant *Allahu Akbar* altogether in a magnificent way, to the extent that the military officials and the civilian nobles as well as the courtiers were so influenced by the Imam (as)'s spiritual attraction that they dismounted from their horses, took off their boots and followed the Imam (as) bare-footed. The number of the crowd mounted minute by minute.

The Imam (as)'s heavenly voice and others' reverberated in the open air. The congregation was flooding toward the desert [gathering place for saying prayer]. The situation had turned unusual.

The news was reported to Ma'mun. He got perplexed, thinking if he let Imam al-Ridha (as) go on to the desert as such and then deliver his eloquent and important sermons, his fiery words would definitely be accepted whole-heartedly by people and this will tremble the pillars of his governance. Something should be done; for it is probable that the Imam (as)'s influential words would lead to a revolution in the ruling system.

Thus, in the middle of the way, Ma'mun sent a message to the holy Imam (as) stating that performing prayers in such a situation would make trouble for him. The Imam (as) returned from the middle of the way and someone else was appointed to lead the Fitr prayer in his place. God knows how this interference by Ma'mun had added to people's cynicism toward his monarchy and exposed the true nature of his ruling system.

## The Last Intrigues and Deceptions

Some who saw Imam al-Ridha (as)'s just and scholarly manners detrimental to their worldly benefits, began to plot intrigues to annihilate both Imam al-Ridha (as) and Ma'mun as well as Fadhl b. Sahl. First, they killed Fadhl in the well-known public bath of Sarakhs. In order to exonerate himself from this murder, Ma'mun mobilized his forces to look for and arrest the murderers of Fadhl b. Sahl and even offered an award for their arrest.

Nevertheless, eliminating Fadhl b. Sahl from the political arena was a source of hope for the Abbasids, but it was not sufficient. Thus, Ma'mun sought to assassinate Imam al-Ridha (as), so he poisoned and martyred the noble Imam (as) whom he had himself invited to Khurasan.

Surprisingly enough, Ma'mun and his caliphate system tried to show the Imam (as)'s martyrdom as natural death. He pretended to be extremely sorrowful of that heart-rending event, and that was actually due to his great fear of the followers of the Holy Imam (as) and the descendants of 'Ali (as).

## Burial Place of Imam al-Ridha (as)

We know that Harun al-Rashid fell sick in a trip toward the end of his life to Khurasan in order to suppress the popular rebellion there, and died after a little while and was buried in a garden belonging to Humaid b. Qahtaba.

When Imam al-Ridha (as) was martyred with the fatal poison that Ma'mun gave him, the latter had his Holiness buried next to his father, Harun. In the time, Humaid's garden was located in a place called Sanabad, where after the martyrdom of Imam al-Ridha (as) was re-named Mashhad al-Ridha and later on was called simply Mashhad.

Since the time of burial (in 203/818.), his holy tomb turned into a place for manifestation of favors and bounties and divine blessings, as well as a pilgrimage place for the Shi'ites and the devoted and faithful people. Gradually, it so happened that the grandeur and magnificence of the Holy Threshold overshadowed all other manifestations.

Works Relating Imam 'Ali b. Musa al-Ridha (as)'s Traditions:

As mentioned before, on many occasions Imam al-Ridha (as) held debates and arguments with the leaders of other religions such as Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and even naturalists and materialists. Luckily, those debates and arguments are handed down to us in reliable volumes under the title, *Al-Ihtijajat* (Argumentations).

His precious traditions (*ahadith*), and wise sayings which were recorded in '*Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha* by Shaykh Saduq in the fourth century (A.H.), '*Ilal al-Sharayi'*, '*Tuhaf al-Uqul* and other reliable books are at present available and illuminating the world of Islam and Shi'ism.

Some Sayings of Imam al-Ridha (as):

1. Man's friend is his intellect while ignorance is his enemy.
2. Expressing friendship to people is a half of intellect.
3. Those that are bestowed with a bounty must be open-handed and liberal to the members of their own family.
4. Imam al-Ridha (as) was asked about trust (in Allah); he answered such a trust is that you fear none but Allah.
5. Your helping out the weak is better than giving alms.
6. It is worthwhile that people provide the required facilities for their families and behave in such a way that the members of their families would not wish death for them.
7. Try to divide your night and day into four sections: one for worship and communion with Allah; one for earning livelihood; one for association with trustworthy friends who remind you of your deficiencies and who are sincere in their friendship; and one for resting and enjoying legitimate and healthy recreations, as desirable utilization of this section will enable you to carry out the other three sections.
8. Make utmost endeavor in satisfying the needs of the faithful, making them happy, and removing their distress; and know that apart from performing the religious obligations, nothing is better in the sight of the Exalted Allah than making the faithful people happy.
9. Do good to every good and bad person; if someone is worthy of that good, much the better, if he or she is not, it is you who are worthy of doing good.
10. No piety is more useful than to abstain from unlawful things and to avoid hurting the believers.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>. Yadbud-i Hashtumin Imam-i Shi'ayan Imam Ridha 'Alayh al-Salam, p. 17 (Quoted from 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha, vol. 1, p. 108.).

<sup>2</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>. A tradition whose narrators are all Infallible Imams (as), relating one after another from the Holy Prophet (S).

<sup>4</sup>. Hadith Qudsi: a hadith revealed to the sacred heart of the Prophet from Divinity.

<sup>5</sup>. Muntahi al-Amal, p. 40 (Section on the biographical account of Imam al-Ridha – A.S.).

<sup>6</sup>. Durar al-Kalam.

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