

[Home](#) > [The Emergence of Shi'ism and the Shi'ites](#) > [Appendix : The Moral and Intellectual Preparation for 'Ali's Guardianship and Succession](#) > The Third Discussion: The Pertinence of 'Ali's Proficient Knowledge of the Qur'an to His Preparation for Succession

The Third Discussion: The Pertinence of 'Ali's Proficient Knowledge of the Qur'an to His Preparation for Succession

In the foregoing, we have noticed a special kind of relationship between 'Ali and the Qur'an. It emerged and developed to a point where, in the Prophet's own words,

The *Qur'an* is with `Ali; and `Ali is with the Qur'an. They shall gseparate not to the day when they will be restored to me at the Basin.^{[1](#)}

Moreover, if it grew and developed to a point where `Ali had had to do battle over the Qur'an's interpretation, just as he did over its revelation,^{[2](#)} what then are its repercussions for the intellectual and moral preparation for his succession?

One can assert, first of all, that the Prophet had himself sought to nurture and to entrench this sort of relation – by the Command of God, as he was wont to say. It appears that there was an important objective for whose realization just such theoretical and practical steps or procedures were needed. One can equally demonstrate this objective in the light of the following observations:

(i) The logic of the *Shariah* (Islamic Law), complete and eternal, must guarantee that the Qur'an is understood – insofar as it is the fundamental source^{[3](#)} of this eternal law – along with its interpretation and provisions. To make the Qur'an the arbitrator among worshippers and nations is precisely what God has commanded us to do, as when He says:

“Do they then seek a judgement from the [Time of Pagan] Ignorance [al jahiliyyah]? Who is better in judgement than God for a people convinced?” (Qur'an 5:53 “al-Ma'idah”).

Consequently, we must rely on the Qur'an for everything small and big, but disavow the judgements of

the days of Ignorance, which are those of impulse. Likewise, God has forbidden us to appeal to a false god, for He asks:

“Do you not see how those who claim to have faith in what has been revealed to you and what has been revealed before you want to appeal to a false god. They have been commanded to disavow it. But Satan wishes to lead them far astray” (Qur'an 4:60 “al-Nisa”).

Here, the Qur'an has rendered the choice of appealing to anything other than what God has brought down, or anyone other than the Prophet, as being one for the arbitration of Satan,⁴ who will lead them inexorably astray. The Qur'an affirms that appealing to anything else than what God has revealed is sinful, iniquitous and constitutes unbelief.

“The ones who judge not by what God has brought down, these are the sinful” (Qur'an 5:50 “al-Ma'idah”);

“The ones who judge not by what God has brought down, these are the iniquitous” (Qur'an 5:48 “al-Ma'idah”);

“The ones who judge not by what God has brought down, these are the unbelievers” (Qur'an 5:47 “al-Ma'idah”).

Our Prophet Muhammad was called on to turn the leaf on sinfulness, iniquity and unbelief.

Therefore, in the logic of the Qur'an, the failure to refer to its provisions brought down by God means appealing to a false god.⁵ If referring to the provisions of the Qur'an has been Divinely ordained, being the Will of the Lord; if this demands obtaining God's judgement as revealed in the Qur'an; then there must presumably be a person both qualified and fully prepared to carry out this Divine Command. There can be no one else but the Prophet, or someone “of him” to discharge and to impart it in his place⁶ – someone qualified like himself and prepared for the task.

(ii) Strong, longstanding disagreement has existed among scholars –especially in areas that are of importance to people and to their lives – for no other reason than a lack of grasp of the Qur'an. Imam `Ali referred to this issue when he disparaged similar disagreement while the Qur'an was there in their midst:

A case goes before one of them for judgement; so he passes judgement based on his opinion. The very same case goes before another, who judges differently from the first. Thereupon the judges gather before the leader who appointed them He approves all of their options – although their Lord is One and their Prophet is One and their Book is One!

Has God really commanded them thus to disagree, and so they merely obey? or did He command them against it, and they now disobey? Has God revealed a deficient religion for whose perfection He seeks their assistance? Are they His partners, that they need only pronounce themselves and He to give His consent? Or has God brought down a perfect religion, but the Prophet failed to convey or to achieve it?

Yet God says:

“...nothing have we omitted from the Book” (Qur'an 6:38 “al-An'am”)...

We have sent down the Book to you explaining every manner of thing – a Guidance and a Mercy...” (Qur'an 16:89 “al-Nahl”)

He also recalls that each part of the Book confirms the other, that the Qur'an has no discrepancies;

“Were it from anyone but God, they would surely have found many discrepancies” (Qur'an 4:82 “al-Nisa”).

The Qur'an is clear and comely.[7](#)

Accordingly, the preparation of someone qualified for expounding the Qur'an must be assumed.

(iii) 'Ali's expertise in the Qur'anic sciences; his knowledge of the Qur'an itself in its explicit and implicit aspects, the clear and the allegorical verses, the general and the particular; his unique ability to understand its verses and to discern its provisions – all of these were recognized by learned Companions, as we have indicated.[8](#)

Prophetic traditions support and help establish them. The latter are also supported by what the exegetes and specialists in traditions on 'Ali, in particular, have recorded, among other sources. The Prophet has said, “O 'Ali, God Almighty and Sublime has commanded me to draw you closer to me and to teach you that you may become mindful. And so, this verse has been revealed:

‘and for retentive ears to retain it’ [Qur'an 69:12 ‘al-Haqqah’].

You are an ear retaining my knowledge...”[9](#)

Reported also is the following statement by 'Ali.

This is the Qur'an. Ask it to speak, but it will not. Rather, I apprise you of it. Verily, it contains knowledge of what is to come, discourse on what is bygone, medicament for your illness and the ordering of your affairs...[10](#)

Thus Imam 'Ali established that this Qur'an contains much that is weighty and of profound meaning; it contains cures for bodily ills and a regular code for every aspect of life – all of which no one but 'Ali – or the emulator of 'Ali – can either procure or grasp. Therefore, it becomes clear that besides him no one, without exception, was more qualified to understand the Qur'an, as obligated to realizing the Divine Command and to executing the Will of the Lord in order to end iniquity, sinfulness and unbelief – according to the texts and the facts than he.

This is a most logical, most sound assumption, one that explains the intellectual and practical measures

taken by the Prophet to give `Ali a singular knowledge of the Qur'an, its sciences and judgements – as the most reliable traditions make clear.

Finally, the context requires us to deal with the inevitable question, and that is the following. If every such measure, every intellectual and practical step was taken for the sake of `Ali b. Abi Talib's succession to the Prophet, why then is there not a covenant written in definitive and satisfactory form that neither gives pretext to its detractors nor elicits speculation?[11](#)

The answer to this is that the texts and all the interconnected narratives adduced here – announcing the Prophet's promulgation of `Ali's Guardianship, Assistantship, Succession and Command after his own death – relate to situations and occasions too numerous to list.

But one matter of singular religious and worldly importance to the Prophet brought him finally to make an official public announcement on the Day of Ghadir, which he repeated several times, as we saw in this Appendix and as we found out from Imam al-Sadr's study. This barely touches on what is determinable through the natural logic of events and the eternal, final law of God. But it is sufficient to anyone who deigns to hear out what he sees.

The Prophet, nevertheless, wanted to diminish the *Ummah's* pains. He honoured the *Ummah* with the Lord's gracious care, keeping it from stumbling and falling astray. He proclaimed on his deathbed, in the very last hour of his noble life, "Come! let me write you an epistle by which you will never go astray..."[12](#)

Around him were gathered some eminent Companions. He wanted it indeed to be a written covenant witnessed by the gathering. However, "what a calamity" occurred (in the words of Ibn `Abbas) when something abruptly came between the Prophet and the writing of the epistle, according to al-Bukhari, who related the following:

When the Prophet's pain worsened, he called out "Bring me material on which I can write you my epistle; after this you shall never stray." Umar then said, "The Prophet is overcome with pain, but we [still] have the Qur'an. We count on God's Book." They agreed and became more clamorous. The Prophet said, "Leave! Quarreling in my house is inappropriate." Ibn `Abbas then left saying[13](#) "What a calamity has come between the Prophet and his epistle..."[14](#)

It may be appropriate here to recall a dialogue, related by Ibn `Abbas, between 'Umar b. al-Khattab (earlier during his Caliphate) and himself. Its gist is as follows. `Umar asks him,

"O `Abd Allah, you will pay in blood, if you keep silent ... Does `Ali have any outstanding issue concerning the Caliphate?" "Yes," I replied. So `Umar said, "There was only convulsed speech, which cannot establish an argument nor dispel a difficulty ... In his state of illness, [the Prophet] wanted to announce [ `Ali's] name, but I prevented that out of pity and concern for Islam. Messenger of God knew what was in my mind and abstained ..."[15](#)

Whether this is true or not, Caliph `Umar's effort was subsequently confirmed on more than one occasion. It transpired that at one time as related by al-Tabari addressing Ibn `Abbas, he said "My people are loathe to have Prophethood and the Caliphate joined in thee..."¹⁶

It appears that the Prophet's abandonment of the idea of writing and malting out a covenant had two aspects to it The first is that of the disagreement, quarreling and clamour that took place in his house just when he intended to write the covenant. This aspect was argued to the point where he was accused of blathering deliriously (in one version), or of being overcome with pain (in another version¹⁷). This is quite serious, since it touches the root of prophethood and the veracity of the Message. Yet the matter had been repeatedly clarified by the Prophet, as we saw. So, let the issue be examined on its own merits and let us make our choice.

Secondly, the Prophet had taken his precautions against just such an eventuality. He prepared the battalion headed by Usamah b. Zayd, and ordered its deployment, whatever the circumstances. So anxious was he to have it deployed, that by some accounts nothing could deflect his attention from it, not even the severity of his illness.¹⁸

Let us relate an account found in Ibn Sa`d's *al-Tabaqat* corroborating this. After mentioning the battalion's preparations, Ibn Sa`d relates how the illness struck the Prophet on a Wednesday, causing him to become feverish; when he awoke Thursday morning he gave the standard to Usamah and told him, "Go into battle in the Name of God and in His Path. Fight those who deny Him." So [the latter] went out standard in hand, under pledge, and gave it to Buraydah b. al-Hasib al Aslami.

He then camped at al Jurf, a place only three miles from Medina. Some *Muhajirin* and *Ansar* were with him, including Abu Bakr, `Umar and Abu Ubaydah. But people were asking, "Is he [i.e. the Prophet] installing this youth above the First *Muhajiran*?" This greatly angered the Prophet, who put a headcloth around his head and climbed the pulpit.

Now then, O People! What is this talk surrounding my appointment of Usamah as commander. You contest his appointment now just as you did previously his father's. But by God, the latter was as fit to command then as his son surely is now! For me, he was one of the most beloved. Both are deserving of every kindness. So, make a point of showing kindness to him, for he is one of the best among you.

The Prophet then went to his house, on Saturday, 10 Rabi' al-Awwal, with the illness growing worse. He gave order to "Carry out Usamah's deployment!"¹⁹

From all these situations, words and course of events it appears the Prophet intended the following:

1) To adapt the intellectual and psychological climate by appointing Usamah as commander over the *Muhajiran* and the *Ansar*. The latter's acceptance of him marked a precedent for 'Ali's own accession to the position of Guardian and Caliph. In this manner, no one would object to his being younger than most.

2) To adapt the political and security climate by preempting likely elements of opposition,²⁰ in order for `Ali to acceded to the position of Caliph. This goal the Prophet was committed to and had planned with vigilance in the hope of bring it to fruition, as we have shown.

However, a different turn of events took place than the one intended. And so, he wished to lessen the *Ummah's* pains, to avoid the vagaries of trial and error. He wished for the *Ummah* to hold fast to the Holy Book and to the Immaculate Family in order to be saved from the wilderness and from perdition. Hence his abandonment of the idea of an absolute, definitively written covenant: so the *Ummah* may continue to be tested, which is the way of God. For God asks,

“Do men think they will be left alone on saying, ‘We have faith,’ without being tested? Those before them we have tested, and God shall know who believes, just as He shall know who denies” (Qur'an 29: 1-3 “al-`Ankabut”).

God has willed all this, just as surely the Prophet had wished for the faithful to believe firmly in the one he appointed over them as his successor. Moreover, he intended their belief to be a reflective one and for their Shi'ism to be sincere – so as to continue to carry out the Divine Will under the latter's blessed leadership. The object is to remove iniquity, sinfulness and unbelief from existence:

God hath promised those of you who have faith and work rightful deeds that they will be made heirs on earth just as surely as those before them were made heirs; that He will consolidate the religion He countenanced for them; that He will surely change them after their fear – secure in [their] worship of Me, and without associating anything with Me. If any deny after this, they are the sinful. (Qur'an 24:55 “al-Nur”)

Muharram 1414 AH

Dr. 'Abd al-Jabbar Sharrarah

¹. Ibn Hajar, al-Sawaiq al muhriqah, p. 123. See also al-Suyuti, Ta'rikh al-khulafa; p. 173.

². Al-Qanduzi al-Balkhi al-Hanafi, Yanabi al-mawaddah, First Edition II:58 (Beirut: Mansurat al-A`lami). Cf. Ibn Hajar, al-Sawaiq al-muhriqah, p. 127.

³. That the Qur'an is the first and fundamental source for religious law is a matter of consensus for the Islamic community. See `Allamah Muhammad Taqi al-Hakim, al- Usul al-ammah lil fiqh al-muqaran, p. 101.

⁴. Al-Zamakhshari, al-Kashshaf I:525.

⁵. The term taghut applies to any person in charge who strays, and everything worshipped besides God. It is also applied to the unbeliever, Satan and idols (al Tarihi, Majma` al-Bahra yn I:276).

⁶. See how “Surrat al-bara'ah” was delivered, in Musnad al-Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal I:3 (Dar Sadir). Also, the text of the hadith in Ibn Hajar's al-Sawa`iq al-muhriqah, p. 122.

⁷. See the text in Sermon No. 18, Nahj al-Balaghah, ed. Dr. Subhi al-Salih, p. 60-1. Cf. as Sawa`iq al-muhriqah, p. 152, where the words of Imam Zayn al `Abidin are recorded in a supplication:

To whom shall those who succeed this Ummah turn, once this community's beacons have been extinguished. The Ummah draws closer to disunion and mutual disagreement. But God says: “Be not like those who became disunited and who disagreed after there came to them the proofs.” And so, only those are to be relied on to convey the proof and to expound the judgement who are the children of the Imams of True Guidance – candlelights in the gloom whom God offered as proof

to His servants. God does not vainly leave His creation without a proof. Do you know or have ever found them to be anything but the branches of the Blessed Tree, the special elect from whom God has removed all defilement and truly purified. He has absolved them of evil and set forth their love for the Book...

[8.](#) See p. 113 Appendix (print).

[9.](#) Abu Naim, *Manazala min al-Quran fi Ali*, ed. al-Mahmudi, p. 266. The editor mentions the chains of authorities in the notes. Cf. al-Suyuti, *al-Dar al-manthur* VI:260 (*Manshurat al-Mar'ashi*).

[10.](#) *Nahj al-balaghah*, Sermon No. 158, p. 223.

[11.](#) This question is raised in *al-Murajaat* between `Allamah Sharaf al-Din and Shaykh Salim al-Bashri (of Azhar Mosque).

[12.](#) Cf. Ibn Sa'd, *al-Tabaqat al-kubra* II:242-44 (Beirut: *Tab'at Beirut lil-Tiba'ah*, 1985).

[13.](#) Translator's emphasis.

[14.](#) *Sahih al-Bukhari* I:37 (q.v. "Kitab al-ilm," Ch. "Kitab al-al-ilm"; Cf. "Kitab al-l'tisam" lithographed copy of printing by Dir al-Amirah, Istanbul; Beirut. *Dar al-Fikr*).

[15.](#) Ibn Abi al-Hadid, *Sharh Nahj al-balaghah* III:97 (Cairo: *Dar al-Kutub al-Arabiyyah al-Kubra*).

[16.](#) *Ta'rikh al-Tabari* II:577 (Beirut: *Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah*).

[17.](#) Ibn Athir, *al-Nahayah fi gharib al-hadith wal-athar*; ed. al-Tanahi V:246 (q.v. "Hajar")

[18.](#) Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kamil fi tarikh* II:218 (*Dar Sadir*).

[19.](#) *Al-Tabaqat al-kubra* II:248-50.

[20.](#) `Allamah `Abd Sharaf al-Din, *al-Muraja'at*, p. 472.

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