

Imamate

Definition of Imamate

In the views of the Shi'ah Imamiyyah, there are two sources to define the theological concept of imamate and its characteristics: The first source is the Holy Qur'an and the noble Sunnah narrated by reliable sources. This is the more trustworthy and reliable source; nay, it is the basis for the second source itself. The second source is whatever has come in the Shi'ah theological books concerning the definition of imamate and its conditions.

However the ahadith about imamate have propounded the issue in so much detail defining the meaning of imamate and the qualities of an imam that it becomes difficult, nay impossible, to derive a brief and concise definition of imamate encomia passing all its necessary elements¹. I have, therefore, preferred to quote from the specific books of theology.

The Imamiyyah theologians have defined imamate as "a universal and direct authority bestowed by God to a particular person in religious and worldly matters²."

Conditions for an Imam

The foundation of imamate depends on divine appointment found in a divine text in the Holy Qur'an or in the confirmed prophetic traditions of the Messenger of Allah (s.'a.w.a.). For the Imamiyyah, imamate is a divine position like prophethood; it cannot be vested except upon one who has been appointed by the Almighty Allah as a prophet or an imam.

And your Lord creates and chooses whom He pleases; to choose is not theirs; (28:68).

Allah knows best where to place His message. (6:124).

The Almighty Allah is Aware of His servants, knows what their hearts conceal and what they portray; He is the Wise who neither engages in amusement nor creates without a purpose. Allah does not choose a messenger unless all the necessary conditions and qualities for carrying the divine message are found in

him for his entire life. So is the case of imamate in view of the Imamiyyah except for one difference which distinguishes the Imam from the Messenger: The latter receives the shari'ah from the Almighty Allah directly whereas the former receives it from the latter only and not through the direct divine revelation.

The qualities of an imam according to the Imamiyyah are as follows:

- i. Infallibility (al-'ismah): Divine protection from sins and from failure in fulfilling the obligations, a protection which prevents the person from forgetfulness and mistakes in conveying the message, implementing the divine laws, and guiding the people.
- ii. He should be the best person in his time in all virtues.
- iii. He should be knowledgeable about the shari'ah in all its scopes and dimensions. He should also be an expert in managing the ummah, with insight in regulating its affairs, and capable of leading and guiding it.
- iv. He should be the most brave and courageous person of his time. The kind of courage, which is necessary to lead the ummah at war as well as in peace. He should also be the wisest of all in regard to the ummah's interest, and the most conscious of the needs and the demands of its members in their personal and social life.
- v. There should be, in the Imam, no blemish physical or moral, in lineage or descent which would prevent him from commanding total control over the various elements of the ummah and from subjugating them completely to his divine leadership.

The imamate as defined above is established through:

- i) A clear text (an-nass),
- ii) Performance of miracles (mu'jizah), which clearly proves the divine link that would, in turn, proves a divine position for the performer. The numbers of the imams, the identifying process for each one of them, and their relationship to one another (e.g., one is the father and the other is the son; or one is the brother of the other) depends on the nass only³.

The conditions for Imamate and the Imam have not been selected arbitrarily; rather, there must be a rational proof or a clear and definite religious text which proves that this or that condition is essential for establishing the Divine Leadership (imamate) and that without it the imamate is not complete. The scholars in line with this basic principle outline the conditions mentioned above.

All other conditions and qualifications are either non-essential in the view of the Imamiyyah or they are special characteristics of the Imams, which the Almighty Allah has bestowed upon them as a mark of honor and status for them. They do not form the general and necessary conditions for imamate.

Examples of conditions which are not considered essential i.e., the conditions not proven by a rational proof or a clear and definite religious text for imamate is that an imam must have a successor from his own children or that the imamate cannot go except to his son or that only son of an imam can succeed an imam.

These are not essential conditions for imamate because imamate depends on the nass. So, for example, if there is a nass, which says that, the imam after al-Hasan ('a.s.) is al-Husayn ('a.s.), then the presence of al-Imam al-Hasan's sons does not prevent his brother from the position of imamate; similarly, it would not even prevent the transferring of imamate to al-Husayn's children or descendants.

Another such example is of a supposed condition that the Imam must be the eldest son of his father. This is also not an essential condition because, just as prophethood, imamate depends on the nass; so if there is a nass for a particular person then it is obligatory to go by the nass even if that person is not the eldest of his father's sons. We shall point out some real examples of this kind when we talk about the Isma'iliyyah and the Fatahiyyah.

An-Nassu 'l-Jaliyy and an-Nassu 'l-Khafiyy: Certain terminologies exist in the Imamiyyah books on imamate, which do not have any positive meaning to the Imamiyyah themselves. The Imamiyyah mentions these terminologies only because they have a positive meaning in the view of the non-Imamiyyah. This is not, however, restricted to the discussion of imamate; rather, it is found in other theological subjects also like in at-tawhid and an-nubuwwah.

Examples of such terminologies are an-nassul-jaliyy (obvious nass) and an-nassu'l-khafiyy (concealed nass). The nass, according to the Imamiyyah, as discussed in Usulu'l-Fiqh (the Principles of Jurisprudence) of both the Shi'ahs and the Sunnis and used in their theological books, means "a statement which has only one meaning that cannot be interpreted otherwise and which creates certainty in the mind of the listener about the intention of the speaker in clear terms without any doubt or ambiguity in it."

So the nass, in this definition, can only be obvious (jaliyy) and clear in its meaning, which cannot accommodate any other interpretation or explanation. This is so, if al-jaliyy means a meaning, which is obvious and clear; and al-khafiyy means a meaning, which is concealed and ambiguous. If al-jaliyy, however, means a nass which is clear for all people in general in the sense that the nass had been heard and received by the people so that there is no room for doubt in its occurrence; and al-khafiyy means a nass which is concealed from the people in general and heard only by a few selected persons.

If this is the meaning of al-jaliyy and al-khafiyy – then it has no relevance for the Imamiyyah because they say that the nass for Amiru 'l-Mu'minin 'Ali ('a.s.) the first Divine Imam as well as the father of the Imams ('a.s.) and their foremost in sequence was a clear nass (al-jaliyy) heard by the Muslims in general. Referring to the traditions narrated by the Imamiyyah and others on the event of Ghadir will suffice to prove this point.

Add to this the fact that if the nass is khafiyy in the sense that only a few people heard it and then these few people narrated it to others creating certainty about its authenticity, this will not harm the fact that it was stated during circumstances when only a few people were able to hear it, because fear of the hypocrites or persecution by the rulers can force the Prophet or the Imam not to reveal the nass except to a selected few whose narration of the nass, at a later stage, would create conviction in the minds of the people about its occurrence and leave no room for doubts and suspicions about its authenticity.

But the non-Imamiyyah, including some of the Zaydiyyah sects, has divided the nass about the imamate of Amiru 'l- Mu'minin 'Ali ('a.s.) into an-nassu 'l-jaliyy and an-nassu 'l- khafiyy. They have taken an-nassu 'l-khafiyy in both the above meanings:

- i) That it was concealed from the Muslims in general and heard only by a few persons.
- ii) That it is liable to interpretation and explanation, leading the person who interprets and explains it to practically violate the injunction embedded within the text (nass). They also adhere to the belief that the nass on the imamate of 'Ali ('a.s.) was of the second type, an-nassu 'l- khafiyy; and, therefore, they do not consider those who have opposed the nass as those who have betrayed and opposed Allah and His Messenger, nor transgressed their bounds or blatantly disobeyed the Messenger of Allah (s.'a.w.a.). In fact, the nass has been divided by these groups into jaliyy and khafiyy in order to defend others [who did not follow that nass] and not because they had doubts concerning the imamate of Amiru 'l-Mu'minin 'Ali ('a.s.).

when the later Imamiyyah theologians wanted to prove the nass on the imamate of Amiru 'l-Mu'minin 'Ali ('a.s.) a binding nass which would compel a Muslim to follow it and which would leave no room for the excuse of not having heard it or for interpretation in its meaning they were faced with this dual division of nass and were forced to present their textual evidence as an-nassu 'l-jaliyy even if they did not agree with the validity of this division of nass.

This can be seen even in the present author, ash-Shaykhu 'l-Mufid (r.a.), who has a treatise entitled as Mas'alah fi 'n-nassi 'l-jaliyy 'ala imamat Amiri 'l- Mu'minin, 'alayhi 's-salam, printed in Baghdad in 1375 AH. This is the reason why we do not see the term an-nassu 'l-jaliyy, based on the dual division of the nass, in the works of the Imamiyyah theologians of the first three Islamic centuries; it is only found in the writings of the later Imamiyyah theologians⁴.

We would most certainly like to draw the attention of our readers to the fact that many terminologies of non-Imamiyyah sects of Islam have entered into the writings of Imamiyyah scholars on theology as well as other subjects for the same reason that we have stated above. One more example of such terms is "imamatu 'l-afdal imamate of the most superior" and "imamatu 'l-mafdul imamate of the less superior".

¹. See "Kitabu 'l-Hujjah" in Usul al-Kafi; Basairu'd-darajat of as-Saffar and the numerous volumes on imamate in al-Bihar.

². See al-Alfayn, p.2; Nahju 'l-mustarshidin, p.62; Qawa'idu 'l-maram, p.174; al-Lawami'u 'l-Ilahiyyah, p.254.

³. On this subject, refer to al-Mufid, al-Ihsan fi imamat Amiri 'l-Mu'minin'alayhi 's-salam, Awailu 'l-maqalat, Tashihu 'l-

i'tiqad; as-Saduq, I'tiqadatu'l-Imamiyyah; at-Tusi, al-Iqtisadu 'l-hadi ila 'r-rashad, Talkhisu 'sh-Shafi, (especially its first volume); as-Sayyid al-Murtada, ash-Shafi; Nasiru 'd-Din at-Tusi, Tajridu 'l-i'tiqad, and its commentary known as Kashfu 'l-murad by al-'Allamah al-Hilli, and also the references mentioned under the definition of imamate

4. See at-Tahrani, adh-Dhari'ah, vol.20, p.397; vol.24, pp.172-4

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