

Introduction

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This is an inquiry into the life of Imam ‘Ali b. Musa’ al-Ridha’, peace be on him, the eighth Imam from the Household of the Prophet. He is Allah’s light, His gift, and His treasure. He and his fathers, the leaders of Islamic Thought, are in no need of praiser’s praise and describers’ description, for Allah, the Exalted, praised them, took away uncleanness from them, and purified them from deviation. Regarding them He, the Exalted, has said: “

Verily Allah intends to keep off from you every kind of uncleanness and to purify you people of the House with a thorough purification.[1](#)”

He has also imposed love for them on all the children of Islam. Moreover He, the Exalted, has said:

“Say: I demand not of you any reward for it (the toils of preaching) except the love of my relations.”[2](#)”

Their grandfather the Messenger, may Allah bless him and his family, associated them to the Qur’an when he said: “I am going to leave among you the *thaqalayn*. If you cleave to them, you will never go astray after me; one of them is greater than the other—that is the Book of Allah which is a cord stretching from the sky to the earth and my offspring from my family. They will never scatter (from each other) until they come to me at the Pool (*hawd*). Hence, think! How will you treat them after me?”[3](#)” Also he, may Allah bless him and his family, regarded them as the life-ships of this community. He has said: “Verily my Household among you are like Noah’s Ark, which whoever embarked was safe, and whoever missed drowned. Verily my Household among you are like the gate of *Hitta* among the children of Isra’iil, through which whoever entered was forgiven.”[4](#)”

Al-Ma’mu’n asked ‘Abd Allah b. Matar, who was an eminent thinker and poet at his time: “What is your opinion of the Household (of the Prophet)?” “What shall I say about the clay which was plunged into the water of the Message and planted in the water of the Inspiration? Nothing will spread from it except the musk of guidance and ambergris of piety,” replied ‘Abd Allah with these brilliant words.

These golden words controlled al-Ma'mu'n's heart, hence he, and in the presence of Imam al-Ridha', ordered the mouth of 'Abd Allah to be stuffed with pearls.⁵

All the exalted values and genuine principles of which man boasts were in the Imams of the Household (of the prophet), peace be on them, for they were some of their elements and qualities.

2

As for the inclinations and qualities of Imam al-Ridha', they were like those of his fathers, the great Imams. He freed himself from the world, renounced its beauties, and turned away from its embellishment, dedicated himself to Allah, devoted himself to Him, and clung to obedience to Him. He had knowledge of the precepts of the religion, inclusively encompassed the law of the Lord of the messengers, helped the weak, relieved the deprived, and accomplished the needs of the needy and other qualities which placed him at the top of honor and glory in the world of Arabs and Muslims.

Imam 'Ali al-Ridha', peace be on him, possessed these original values in all their forms and kinds, for he completely freed himself from the world and divorced it three times, just as his grandfather Imam 'Ali, the Commander of the faithful, peace be on him, did. Hence, he paid no attention to its vanities and embellishment. This clearly appeared when he undertook the succession, which was the greatest office in the Islamic State, hence he was the second character after al-Ma'mu'n.

Nevertheless, he rejected all the seductions of government and authority. He intensely hated the popular festivals and all kinds of honoring and magnifying which the people would hold for their kings and rulers. He announced this when he said: "Man's waking behind a man is a trial for the followed and abasement for the follower.⁶" The narrators have said: "Imam 'Ali b. Musa' al-Ridha' would go to the bath-house, but the owner of the bath-house did not recognize him. It happened that there was a soldier in the bath-house and the soldier asked the Imam to rub and clean him. The Imam responded to his request. When the soldier came to know of the Imam, he became fearful and terrified. However, the Imam calmed his fear and made him know that he rendered him a human service."

Among his high moral traits is that he would eat with his boys and retainers. He hated to distinguish himself from them. There are other high moral traits which he inherited from his grandfather, the greatest Messenger, may Allah bless him and his family.

3

The Imams of *Ahl al-Bayt*, peace be on them, had their own brilliant policy and method in the world of government and policy. They thought that government should be a means for establishing pure justice and truth, spreading love and friendship among men. They thought that government should be a means for refreshing peoples, achieving their welfare, security, and prosperity. They thought that government was worthless if it did not achieve these noble aims through which peoples become happy. Listen to

what the master of the Household (of the Prophet), Imam ‘Ali, the Commander of the faithful, peace be on him, when he said to his helper and adviser, ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Abba’s to whom he held up his sandals made of fiber and asked him:

“Ibn ‘Abba’s, how much do you value these sandals?”

“They have no value,” Ibn ‘Abba’s retorted.

“By Allah, they are more lovable to me than these affairs of yours but for the fact that I must establish (what is) true and ward off (what is) false,” explained the Imam.

The dictionary of policy has no words greater or more exalted than these words said by Imam ‘Ali, the Commander of the faithful and greatest Muslim thinker, peace be on him. Authority has no value unless it establishes fairness and justice, wards off falsehood and tyranny.

This is the path which Allah has chosen for His servants, that they may be righteous, and that they may enjoy a government which stands on neither deception nor misleading nor playing with the fates of the community.

4

Imam al-Ridha’, peace be on him, appeared on the arena of the political life in Islam, and he was the most brilliant politician in Islamic history. He was steadfast in his political attitudes, so he was not deceived by the bright ways and false hopes of al-Mu’mu’n, the ‘Abba’sid king, when he abdicated the throne and entrusted it to him. This abdication of the throne was not real; nor was it true at all; rather al-Ma’mu’n had decided that in order to achieve his political goals; probably the most important one of these goals is that he wanted to suppress those burning revolts which were about to burn the ‘Abba’sid government and to fold its flag. Among those revolts was that of Abu’ al-Sara’ya’. It is worth mentioning that Abu’ al-Sara’ya’ was an inspired military commander like Abu’ Muslim al-Khurasani, who had overthrown the Umayyad government. Moreover al-Ma’mu’n wanted to conciliate the Iranians and all supporters of the Household (of the Prophet) whom the previous ‘Abba’sid governments had wronged, persecuted, and deprived of their natural rights.

Imam al-Ridha’, peace be on him, was fully aware of the political reasons which urged al-Ma’mu’n to abdicate the office of the caliphate and to hand it over to him, peace be on him. He, peace be on him, vigorously refused to undertake it. When al-Ma’mu’n was despair of him, he threatened him with death, so the Imam reluctantly responded to him according to the following conditions:

A. He (Imam al-Ridha’) would not command; nor would he prohibit.

B. He would not remove any person from his office.

C. He would not appoint any person in any of the state offices.

These conditions indicate that the Imam was the apparent successor of al-Ma'mu'n, and that the government of al-Ma'mu'n was illegal, for if it had been legal, he would not have mentioned these conditions.

Only few days ago and all the people came to know that the Imam had deep faith and that al-Ma'mu'n had nothing except cunning. They understood that al-Ma'mu'n wanted to achieve his political aims. When al-Ma'mu'n had achieved his goals, he assassinated the Imam, for he was unable to remove him from the office of regency. We will explain this matter in the chapters that follow.

5

Among the aims of this book is to give proof of the Imam's abundant knowledge of philosophy, theology, medicine, jurisprudence, and so on. This can be indicated objectively through his debates with the great philosophers and scholars from different countries and cities. It is worth mentioning that al-Ma'mu'n had asked them to come to Khurasa'n in order to examine the Imam. He held a private and secret meeting with them and promised to give them a lot of money if they could silence the Imam with their arguments and render him incapable of answering them, that he might use this incapability as a means for slandering and defaming the Shi'ites who believed that the Imams of the Household (of the Prophet), peace be on them, were the most knowledgeable of the community, and that Allah endowed them knowledge and excellencies just as He had endowed His prophets and His testamentary trustees.

The scholars responded to al-Ma'mu'n's summons and asked the Imam about the vaguest and most difficult matters. The historians have said: "The scholars asked Imam 'Ali b. Musa' al-Ridha' more than twenty thousand questions about various matters, and he skillfully answered them. Then they admired his abundant knowledge and most of them believed in his Imamate." As a result al-Ma'mu'n was forced to prevent the scholars and others from meeting the Imam. Meanwhile he kept him under intense observation lest the people should admire him.

It is worth mentioning that these debates were recorded by some of the Imam's students, but we have not found them yet. Perhaps they are part of the manuscripts which Arab and Islamic world has lost.

Anyhow, the Shi'ite historians have reported a small group of these debates which are of great importance. For they, though few in number, show the Imam's abundant and scientific wealth, and they indicate that he was a unique thinker and scholar in the world of Islam.

6

Some books of Imam al-Ridha', peace be on him, have been reported and mentioned in the books of some historians and biographers such as Ibn al-Nadim, al-Tu'si, and others. They are as follows:

A. Tibb (Dissertation) of Imam al-Ridha'

It is a great, medical account which the Imam wrote according to al-Ma'mu'n's request and is called *al-Risa'la al-Dhahabiya* (the Golden Dissertation). It contains the Imam's health programs on foods which improves man's body and protects it from maladies. It also contains his general prescriptions such as refraining from eating too much food which gives rise to high blood pressure, diabetes, arteriosclerosis, and other dangerous diseases. It is certain that if one puts into practice the Imam's prescriptions, he will need no medicine.

As this dissertation is of great importance, some meritorious people have explained it according to modern medicine. Among them is Dr. al-Sayyid Sa'hib Zayni.

B. Imam al-Ridha's Musnad

It contains some traditions which the Imam, peace be on him, has reported from his grandfather, the greatest Prophet, may Allah bless him and his family. It was printed in Cairo. 'Alla'ma 'Abd al-Wa'si' b. Yahya' al-Wa'simi printed and commented on it.

C. Jawa'm' al-Shri'a

It contains outstanding, religious precepts and mother, juristic problems. Imam al-Ridha', peace be on him, dictated it to al-Fadal b. Sahl, the prime minister of al-Ma'mu'n. That was according to al-Ma'mu'n's request. This dissertation has been mentioned in *Tuhaf al-'Uqu'l* and other Shi'ite books. We have reported it from them and mentioned it in the book. These books are part of the Imam's scientific wealth.

As for the jurisprudence of Imam al-Ridha', we have indicated that it is not among his works; rather it belongs to other than him and is ascribed to him.

Anyhow, the narrators have reported from the Imam a large group of outstanding precepts and moral teachings. Islam wants its followers to adopt such precepts and teachings, that they may develop their life.

This book includes biographies of some great scholars and narrators who studied under the Imam, peace be on him, narrated his traditions and his wise sayings, and wrote books about them. It is certain that mentioning such biographies will enhance the research about the Imam's life, for it shows that the scholars in that time took great care of taking knowledge and sciences from the Imam. The narrators and historians have unanimously agreed that the Imam was a unique Muslim thinker, and that he derived his own knowledge from that of his pure fore-fathers, peace be on them, who were the guardians of the knowledge of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and his family, and inheritors of his wise

sayings.

8

This book contains an inquiry into the time of Imam al-Ridha', peace be on him, for such a time was full of economic, scientific, social, political, and other events which had great effects on the life of the people.

Mentioning such events is necessary for every researcher. It is worth mentioning that psychology and sociology have established that events in every time have direct effects on man's life and intellect.

The time of the Imam was full of important events of which is that Ha'ru'n al-Rashid created a conflict between his two sons al-Amin and al-Ma'mu'n. This conflict resulted in destroying Baghdad, the most beautiful capital in the Middle East, and murdering a large group of people. Another example of these events is the revolt of the inspired leader, Abu' al-Sara'ya', and other great revolts which were about to destroy the 'Abba'sid government and to fold its standard.

Yet another example of the events in that time was the matter of creating the Qur'an. It was a hidden or neglected theological problem, but it was al-Ma'mu'n who moved it and it led to shedding blood without any right, spreading disorders and discords among the Muslims.

However, through his political cleverness, al-Ma'mu'n could overcome all those events he faced. Then he forced Imam al-Ridha' the hope of the Muslim community, peace be on him, to accept the succession after him and made the people busy thinking of this great event. Accordingly, he was able to suppress all those revolts against him.

9

We have deeply and inclusively probed into the characters of the 'Abba'sid kings with whom Imam al-Ridha', peace be on him, coincided. As a result we have concluded that their characters are similar to those of the Umayyads, who spent the property of Allah on themselves and enslaved His servants. After this serious research on their characters, we have come to know that they did not perform any good deed; nor did they pay attention to the interests of the Muslims. Rather, they were absorbed in satisfying their pleasures and desires. They spent on their red nights in Baghdad millions of the funds of the Muslims. They enriched singers, abusers, and the dissolute; meanwhile they subjected the people to poverty and unhappiness.

Moreover, they ordered the innocent to be whipped, imprisoned, and killed by sword; at the head of those innocent were the 'Alawide Sayyids who demanded nothing except establishing social justice. They ordered their tax collectors to show rudeness and brutality toward farmers, craftsmen, and manufacturers. As a result the tax collectors destroyed the people's bodies by whip and went too far in wronging the people.

As for inquiring into Islamic history, it must be objective, honest, far from doctrinal and traditional trends, for this history has many subjects which have hidden the truth and concealed realities, so it is incumbent on (us) to spend more efforts in order to distinguish the right from the wrong and the true from the false. An example of these subjects is that noble attributes and great titles were given to the Umayyad and the ‘Abba’sid kings; they were given the titles as Allah’s vicegerents on earth, while this noble title represents fairness, justice, and law. I (the author) seek refuge in Allah from such titles which were given to persons like Yazid, Marwa’n, al-Walid, and other ‘Abba’sid kings who turned the life of the people into an unbearable inferno.

Some historians and authors think that the measure of one’s highness and great position is his sitting on the throne of government and his seizing the reins of general authority over a country. This is incorrect; the measure of one’s exaltedness in Islamic viewpoint is the services which he renders to his community in the fields of economy, culture, security, and prosperity. If Muslim historians and authors deprive kings of these titles and give them to those who render great services to the community, then they will render great service to Islamic history, for the orientalist and others who harbor malice against Islam have criticized Islam because of such kings who acted in a manner different from Islamic justice and fairness. They think that these kings represent Islam in their conducts and works. If those who criticize Islam probe into Islamic precepts, they will find them noble, creative, comply with justice and nature, have nothing—praise belongs to Allah—which complies with injustice. Rather they will find that Islamic precepts oppose injustice, and that the irregular behavior of some Muslim kings does not represent Islam.

This is not the first book to be written about the life of Imam ‘Ali b. Musa’ al-Ridha’, peace be on him. Rather many books have been written on his life in Arabic and other than it, and the most important of them is al-Sayyid Ja’far Murtada’s *the Life of Imam al-Ridha’*, peace be on him, for this book is rich in information.

It is worth mentioning that all the books written on the personality of this great Imam have not encompassed its realities yet. This a far-fetched hope, for the Imam, peace be on him, had boundless intellectual wealth like that of the leading Imams, peace be on them, who were guardians of righteousness, and inheritors of the knowledge of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and his family.

Before I end this introduction to the book, I would like to thank His Eminence, our great professor, the Hujjah of Islam and Muslims, Shaykh Husayn al-Khalifa for his care, favor, and help with printing some

of my books; I would particularly like to thank His Eminence al-Hujjah, the great ‘Alla’ma, my brother, Ha’di Sharif al-Qarashi for the creative efforts he rendered to me, his valuable notes on the book, his checking some of the books I made use of, and his encouraging me to serve the members of the House (*Ahl al-Bayt*), peace be on. I ask Allah, the Exalted, to reward him just as He rewards the righteous from among His servants. Verily He is the Supporter of purpose and success.

Holy Najaf,

Shawwa’l 14th, 1411 A. H.

Ba’qir Sharif al-Qarashi

[1.](#) Qur’an, 33, 22.

[2.](#) Ibid., 41, 23.

[3.](#) Al-Tirmidhi, Sahih, vol. 2, p. 308. Asad al-Gha’ba, vol. 2, p. 12.

[4.](#) Majma’ al-Zawa’id, vol. 9, p. 68. Al-Hiya, vol. 4, p. 306. Ta’rikh Baghdad, vol. 2, p. 19.

[5.](#) Al-Majlisi, Biha’r al-Anwa’r, vol. 12, p. 71.

[6.](#) Al-Ya’qu’bi, Ta’rikh.

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