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Lesson 45: The Eighth Imām (‘Alī ibn Musa)

Name: ‘Ali.
Agnomen: Abu ‘l-Hasan ath-Thāni.
Title: Ar-Ridha.
Father: Musa ibn Ja‘far.
Mother: Najma, also known as Taktum.
Birth: 11th Dhu ‘l-Qa’dah, 148 AH in Medina.
Death: 29th Safar, 203 AH in Mashhad, Tūs (Khurāsan).

1. Birth

Imam ‘Alī ar-Ridha was the son of the seventh Imam and according to well-known accounts was born in 148/765 and died in 203/817.

2. Political Circumstances of His Imamate

Imam ar-Ridha (a.s.) became the Imam at the age of thirtyfive, through Divine Command and the decree of his forefathers. The period of his imamate coincided with the caliphate of Hārun and then his sons Amin and Ma’mun.

Hārun had appointed Amin as his successor with the condition that the latter would name his brother, Ma’mun, as his successor. But after the death of Hārun in 194, Amin named his own son, Musa, as his successor. This became a cause of conflict between the brothers which led to bloody wars and finally the assasination of Amin in 198, after which Ma’mun became caliph. Imam ar-Ridha took advantage of this chaotic situation and continued the tradition of his forefathers in educating and teaching his companions and followers.

Until that day the policy of the ‘Abbāsid caliphate toward the Shi‘ites had been increasingly harsh and cruel. Every once in a while one of the supporters of ‘Alī would revolt, causing bloody wars and

rebellions which were of great difficulty and consequence for the caliphate.

The Shi‘ite Imams would not cooperate with those who carried out these rebellions and would not interfere with their affairs. The Shi‘ites of that day, who comprised a considerable population, continued to consider the Imams as their religious leaders to whom obedience was obligatory and believed in them as the real caliphs of the Holy Prophet. They considered the caliphate to be far from the sacred authority of their Imams, for the caliphate had come to seem more like the courts of the Persian kings and Roman emperors, and was being run by a group of people more interested in worldly rule than in the strict application of religious principles. The continuation of such a situation was dangerous for the structure of the caliphate and was a serious threat to it.
Ma’mun thought of finding a new solution for these difficulties which the seventy-year old policy of his ‘Abbasid predecessors had not been able to solve. To accomplish this end he adopted some pro-Shi‘ite policies:

● he openly used to say that Imam ‘Ali bin Abi Talib was better suited for caliphate than Abu Bakr or ‘Umar ibn Khattab.

● he openly used to curse Mu‘awiya bin Abi Sufyan.

● he gave Fadak back to the descendants of ‘Ali and Fatima.

● he chose Imam ‘Ali ar-Ridha as his successor, hoping in this way to overcome two difficulties: first of all to prevent the descendants of the Prophet from rebelling against the government since they would be involved in the government themselves, and secondly, to cause the people to lose their spiritual belief and inner attachment to the Imams. This would be accomplished by having the Imams become engrossed in worldly matters and politics itself, which had always been considered by the Shi‘ites to be evil and impure. In this way their religious organization would crumble and they would no longer present any danger to the caliphate. Obviously, after accomplishing these ends, the removal of the Imam would present no difficulties to the ‘Abbasids.

3. Imam ar-Ridha’s Historical Journey to Marw

In order to have his last decision put into effect, Ma’mun asked Imam ar-Ridha to come to Marw from Medina. This was the longest journey undertaken by any of the Shi‘a Imams: from Medina (north-west of Arabia) to Marw (in Turkmenistan, north of the Afghan border). The Imam passed through southern Iraq, into sourthern Persia on to the famous city of Neshapur and further north into Turkmenistan.

This journey itself availed an opportunity for the Muslim populace to see the Shi‘a Imam (a descendant of the Holy Prophet) in person and hear his words of wisdom. While the Imam was about to leave Nishapur, the scholars of the city took hold of his camel’s reign and insisted upon him to narrate from his forefathers: The Imam obliged as follows:

My father, Musa bin Ja‘far, narrated to me from his father, Ja‘far bin Muhammad, who narrated from his father, Muhammad bin ‘Ali, who narrated from his father, ‘Ali ibn al-Husayn, who narrated from his father, al-Husayn bin ‘Ali, who narrated from his father, ‘Ali bin Abi Talib, who said, I heard the Prophet (s.a.w.) saying, “I heard Jibrail saying, ‘The Almighty Allah said,

“I surely am the God besides whom there is no god, so worship Me. Whoever comes with the testimony of tawhid sincerely, he has surely entered My castle; and whoever enters My castle, he shall be protected from My chastisement.”’”

Then the Imam added that this salvation is guaranteed “with its conditions; and I am one of its conditions.” That is, together with *tawhid*, one must also believe in other fundamentals of Islam like *nubuwwa* and *imamat* in order to gain salvation in the hereafter. Because of its excellent chain of narrators, this hadith is known as “*hadith silsilatu ’dh-dhabab* — hadith with the golden chain [of narrators].”

4. Ma’mun’s Decision & Its Consequences

Finally Imam ar-Ridha arrived at Marw. Ma’mun offered him first the caliphate and then the succession to the caliphate. The Imam made his apologies and turned down the proposal, but he was finally compelled to accept the successorship—the Imam accepted the successorship with the condition that he would not interfere in governmental affairs or in the appointment or dismissal of government agents.

This event occurred in 200/814. But soon Ma’mun realized that he had committed an error, for there was a rapid spread of Shi‘ism, a growth in the attachment of the populace to the Imam, and an astounding reception was given to the Imam by the people and even by the army and govenment agents.

For example, once just a few days before an ‘idd, Ma’mun asked Imam ar-Ridha to lead the ‘idd prayer. The Imam refused at first, but then Ma’mun insisted. Finally, the Imam accepted but on the condition that he would lead the prayer the way the Prophet used to do. On the day of ‘idd, all the high ranking officials of Ma’mun came to the Imam’s house and waited for him outside. There were also many common people waiting for the Imam as well. The holy Imam came out of the house, barefooted, and started walking calmly with a walking stick in one hand. The officials stepped down from their horses and started walking behind the Imam. After every few steps he would stop and look towards the sky and say *“Allahu Akbar.”* The official entourage and the masses followed the Imam in what he was doing. Soon the entire city of Marw was ringing with the sound of *“Allahu Akbar”.* Ma’mun was informed by his spies that if this procession continues to the prayer area, the masses could easily turn against the ‘Abbasids and in favour of the Ahlul Bayt. Ma’mun immediately sent an emissary with the message to the Imam that by insisting that you lead the prayer, we have put you in difficulty so please return to your residence and the ‘idd prayer will be led by the regular imam. The Imam ordered that his shoes and horse be brought, he got on it and returned home. This episode made it clear for the people that Ma’mun was not sincere in his show of respect towards Imam ar-Ridha: he would respect him as long as that did not endanger his

own caliphate.

Unlike other caliphs, Ma'mun displayed great interest in having works on the intellectual sciences translated into Arabic. He organised gatherings in which scholars of different religions and sects assembled and carried out scientific and scholarly debates. Imam 'Ali ar-Ridha also participated in these assemblies and joined in the discussions with scholars of other religions. Many of these debates are recorded in the collections of Shi'ite hadiths. These debates also gave a high profile to the Imam's status in knowledge to the extent that people started making comments that 'Ali ar-Ridha is more deserving of the caliphate than Ma'mun.

Concerned with the spread of Shi'ism and the popularity of Imam ar-Ridha, Ma'mun sought to find a remedy for this difficulty — he had the Imam poisoned and martyred. After his death the Imam was buried in the city of Tus in Iran, which is now called Mashhad.

5. Words of Wisdom

Some one asked Imam ar-Ridha, "Where is God?"
The Imam: "This is an invalid question because God created space; He cannot be limited to a place or recognized by the senses; He is unlike everything."
"When did God come to exist?"
The Imam: "Tell me when He did not exist, so that I can tell when he came to exist!"
"What is the proof that the world was created?"
The Imam: "It did not exist, and then came to being. You know that the world did not create itself."
"Can you describe God for us?"
The Imam: "Whoever describes God by attributes of other things is mistaken and misguided. I will describe God the way He has described Himself without forming any shape or image in my mind:
"He is not perceived by the [five] senses.
"He cannot be compared to people.
"He is wellknown without resemblance to anything.
"He is not unjust in His judgements..."

* * *

"What is *im*ān (faith) and what is *islām* (submission)?"
The Imam: "*Im*ān is superior to *islām*; *taqwā* (constant consciousness of God) is superior to faith; conviction is superior to *taqwā*..."
"What is conviction?"
The Imam: "Putting your trust in God, and submitting yourself to His command and wish, and being pleased with His decree, and leaving the final decision to Him."

* * *

“Why did the people turn away from ‘Ali and accept others as caliphs while they knew of his exemplary services to Islam and his high status in the eyes of the Prophet?”
The Imam: “Since ‘Ali had killed many of their fathers, uncles, brothers and relatives who had come to fight against Islam; and this created the feeling of animosity in their hearts against ‘Ali and, consequently, they did not like that ‘Ali should become their leader. They did not harbour such feelings against the other [caliphs] since they did not hold the same [high] position with the Prophet as that of ‘Ali neither did they rank equal to him in defending Islam in *jih*ḍ*d*. This is the reason why people turned away from ‘Ali and accepted others.”

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This lesson has been written and compiled by Sayyid M. Rizvi by using the following sources.
1. *Shi’a Islam’* of Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn at-Tabataba’i.
2. *Pishway-e Hastum: Hazrat ‘Ali ar-Riza* (*a.s.*) by Dar Rah-e Haq, Qum.

The main sources have been extensively edited in order to fit the requirements of our course. Also, for the sake of brevity, we have not included the references quoted by our sources. Those who are interested to know the sources may refer to those mentioned above.

Question Paper on Lesson 45

Question 1: [10 points]
True or False:
(a) The eighth Imam’s imamate started in 194 A.H.

(b) Imam ar-Riḍ’s imamate coincided with the reigns of Hārun, Amin and Ma’mun.

(c) Violation of the conditions of successorship led to a civil war between Amin and Ma’mun, and the eventual death of the former.

(d) Imam ar-Riḍ’s journey from Medina to Marw was the longest journey undertaken by any Shi‘a Imam.

(e) Imam ar-Riḍ narrated the hadith silsilatu ’dh-dhahab in the city of Marw.

(f) Hārun ar-Rashid organized scholarly debates in Marw.

(g) “Many people turned away from Imam ‘Ali because he had killed many of their relatives in the battles between Muslims and non-Muslims.”

(h) Imam ar-Riḍ was riding a horse on his way to the ‘idd prayer.

(i) Ma’mun was concerned with revolts by the Shi‘as.

(j) Ma’mun was sincere in making the Imam his heir.

Question 2: [20 points]
Describe the pro-Shi‘ite policies adopted by Ma’mun ar-Rashid.

Question 3: [20 points]
Describe the impact of Imam ‘Ali ar-Rid’s journey from Medina to Marw.

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