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Lesson 46: The Ninth Imām (Muhammad bin ‘Alī)

Name: Muhammad bin ‘Ali.
Agnomen: Abu Ja‘far; Ibnu ’r-Rida.
Title: At-Taqi; al-Jawād.
Father: ‘Ali ar-Ridha.
Mother: Sabika, also known as Khayzarān.
Birth: 10th Rajab, 195 AH in Medina.
Death: 29th Dhu ’l-Qa‘dah, 220 AH in Kazimayn.

1. Birth & Imamate in Childhood

Imam Muhammad at-Taqi was born in 195/809 in Medina. The news of his birth caused extraordinary joy among the Shi‘as of that time. Imam ar-Ridha was childless till the age of forty, and some Shi‘as were concerned about the continuation of imamate: who would succeed Imam ar-Ridha? So the birth of the ninth Imam brought about a mood of festivity among the Shi‘as of Ahlul Bayt.

Imam ‘Ali ar-Ridha died in 203 A.H.; and Muhammad at-Taqi became the Imam at the age of eight. The age of the Imam caused a concern in the minds of some elder members of the Shi‘a community because no Imam had reached the position of imamate at this young age. Mu‘alla bin Muhammad narrates that after the death of Imam ar-Ridha, he saw Imam at-Taqi and closely observed his physical size and age in order to report it to others. At that moment, Imam at-Taqi said, “O Mu‘alla, Allāh has argued about imamat just as he argued about nubuwwat when He said, ‘And We gave prophethood to him [i.e., Yahya] when he was still a child.’”

After the death of Imam ar-Ridha, a group of eighty scholars from Baghdad and other places came to Mecca for hajj. On the way, they stopped at Medina and met Imam at-Taqi. They were particularly interested in meeting the young Imam and wanted to satisfy themselves about his capabilities. The

meeting went on for a long time with the visitors asking him questions and the Imam replying in a convincing and satisfying manner. All left fully convinced that he truly was the Imam appointed by Allah, *subhanahu wa ta'ala*, and endowed with knowledge.

Ishaq was one of the eighty persons in that meeting. He narrates his impression as follows: I had written ten questions in a letter for the Imam and had decided that if he answers my questions, then I will ask him to pray for me that the child that my wife is carrying be a male child. The meeting, however, went on for a long time so I decided to present my letter to him the next day. But as I was about to leave, the Imam called me and said, "O Ishaq! Allah has accepted my prayer; therefore, name your son 'Ahmad'." The answer to his prayer without even stating it to the Imam fully convinced Ishaq that Muhammad at-Taqi, inspite of his young age, was the Imam!

2. Ma'mun & Imam at-Taqi (a.s.)

Caliph Ma'mun ar-Rashid, in pursuing the same policies as mentioned in the previous lesson, asked that Imam Muhammad at-Taqi (a.s.) be brought from Medina to Baghdad. This journey took place in 204 A.H., a year after the death of the eighth Imam.

When Ma'mun met the young Imam, he was impressed with the latter's knowledge; and he proposed to marry his daughter Ummul Fazl to the Imam. When the elders of the 'Abbasid clan learned of this decision, they tried to change Ma'mun's views: they reminded him of dangers in promoting the decendants of 'Ali, and the possible loss of power. Realizing that their words had no effect on Ma'mun, they finally said, "Although you are impressed by this child; but he is still a child. Wait till he grows up and gets educated, then you may marry your daughter to him."

Ma'mun: "Woe unto you! I know this child better than you; he comes from a family which is bestowed with knowledge by God. His ancestors were never in need of knowledge and character from others. If you wish, you may examine him."

The elders of the 'Abbasid agreed to examine him. They approached Yahya bin Aktham, the chief judge (qazi) of the 'Abbasid court, and asked him to prepare some difficult questions which the Imam would not be able to answer.

At an appointed time, the meeting between Imam Muhammad at-Taqi (a.s.) and Yahya bin Aktham took place in the presence of Ma'mun and the elders of the 'Abbasid clan.

After the formalities, Yahya asked: "What is your view about a person who hunts while he is in the *ihram*?" (*Ihram* means pilgrim's garment; a person in *ihram* is not allowed to hunt.)

Imam at-Taqi: "This question has many facets:
"Was the person outside the boundary of the holy territory or inside?
"Did he know that it was forbidden to hunt while in ihram or he did not?

“Did he do it intentionally or was it an accident?
“Was he a free man or a slave?
“Was he minor or an adult?
“Was this his first hunting in the state of ihr□m or a second time?
“Was the hunted creature a bird or something else?
“Was it big or small?
“Was the person sorry that he committed the offence or was he careless about such issues?
“Was it in the night or during the day?
“Was he in the state of ihr□m for the minor pilgrimage or for the major pilgrimage?”

Yahya bin Aktham was dumbfounded by this thorough analysis of the question by the ten year old Imam Muhammad at–Taqi! He could not even utter a word, and the audience clearly saw the signs of defeat on his face!

Ma’mun broke the silence by saying, “Praise be to All□h who proved me right in my estimation of this young man.” Then he faced the elders of the ‘Abb□sids and rebuked them: “Now do you realize what I was saying?” Then he proposed the marriage of his daughter to the Imam, and the Imam accepted it. The young Imam also recited the *khutba* (sermon) before the actual marriage which has become a common *khutba* in the Shi‘a marriage ceremonies. The khutba is as follows:

“All praise is due to All□h, in recognition of His blessings. [I declare that] there is no god but All□h, in sincere belief in His oneness. And may All□h send His blessings upon Muhammad, the leader of His creatures, and upon the chosen one of his family.

“It is All□h’s grace upon the people that He has made them free from the forbidden [means of fulfilling sexual urge] by the permissible [institution of marriage]. He, the Exalted, said: ‘And marry the single among you (those who are good ones from among your slaves and maids)—if they are poor, All□h will make them free from need from His grace; All□h, indeed, is Generous, All–Knowing.’”

After the marriage ceremony, when only a few people had remained in the gathering, Ma’mun requested the Imam to provide the answer for the various situations that he had derived from Yahya’s single question. The holy Imam gave a detailed answer to all those situations.

Then Ma’mun proposed that now the Imam should ask a question to Yahya bin Aktham. The latter replied, “If I know the answer, I will reply; otherwise, I will learn from you.”

Imam Muhammad at–Taqi (a.s.) asked: “Can you describe the situation in which a man looked at a woman at dawn while it was forbidden (*har□m*) for him to do so; but then at sunrise, it was permissible (*hal□l*) for him to look at her? Then at noon hour, it became har□m for him to look at that woman; but in the afternoon, it became permissible for him to look at her? Then at sunset, it became har□m for him to look at that woman; but at night, it became hal□l for him to look at her? Then at midnight, it became har□m for him to look at her; but at dawn, it became hal□l for him to do so?”

Yahya bin Aktham said, “By Allāh! I do not know the answer to this question. We would, however, benefit from your answer.”

The Imam explained the answer as follows:

“At dawn, the woman was the slave of someone else; however, by sunrise, the man had already bought her for himself and so it became halāl for him to look at her.
“At noon, he made her free, and so she became harām for him; but by afternoon, he had married her, so she became halāl for him.
“At sunset, he did *zihār*[1] by which one’s wife becomes harām for a person; but by night time he paid the penalty for *zihar*, and so she became halāl for him again.
“At midnight, he divorced her; but by next morning, he revoked his divorce, and so she became halāl for him.”

Thus the ten year old Imam, from the descendants of ‘Ali and Fātimah, proved to the caliph and his entourage that God had endowed them with the knowledge to guide the Muslim *ummah* as the Prophet had truly said, “Do not try to teach them, because they are not in need of your teaching.”

* * *

One must remember that Ma’mun was a very shrewd politician. This marriage between his daughter and Imam Muhammad at-Taqi (a.s.) should not be taken as proof that he was a Shi‘a. As mentioned in the previous lesson, these actions were all politically motivated by Ma’mun to calm the opposition of the Shi‘a masses. Other motives for the marriage can be described as follows:

● By having his daughter as Imam’s wife, Ma’mun was guaranteed a continuous flow of information about the Imam’s activities.

● By becoming the son-in-law of Ma’mun at this young age, the caliph hoped that the personality of the Imam would be tarnished with worldly luxuries and entertainment of the establishment, and thus lose the respect in the eyes of his Shi‘as.

● By this marriage, prove to the Shi‘a masses that he respects the Ahlul Bayt, and thus neutralize their opposition to his rule.

● Ma’mun was hoping that if Imam at-Taqi gets a child through his daughter, he can claim to be the grandfather of a child from the descendants of Imam ‘Ali and Fatimah (a.s.). But Allāh, *subhānahu wa ta‘āla*, did not fulfill this hope because none of the children of the Imam were born from Ma’mun’s daughter!

Imam Muhammad at-Taqi (a.s.) did not stay for long in Baghdad. He insisted on returning to Medina with his wife, the daughter of Ma’mun. His return to Medina where he stayed till the year 220 A.H. foiled the plans of Ma’mun ar-Rashid.

3. Mu‘tasim’s Rule

Ma’mun ar-Rashid died in the year 218 A.H. He was succeeded by his brother, Mu‘tasim billah. In the year 220, Mu‘tasim ordered that Imam Muhammad at-Taqi be brought from Medina to Baghdad.

One day a person came to the court of Mu‘tasim and confessed that he had committed theft and would like to be punished so that he could be free from the guilt and punishment in the hereafter. The Qur’an says that the punishment for theft (with some conditions) is cutting off the thief’s *yad*. *Yad* means: hand, forearm and elbow. So the caliph called all the prominent religious scholars, including Imam Muhammad at-Taqi (a.s.), and asked: “From where should the *yad* of the thief be cut?” (The Qur’an is asking for the definition of “yad”.)

Ibn Abi Da’ud, the chief judge, said, “From the wrist.”
Mu‘tasim: “What is your proof for that?”
Ibn Abi Da’ud: “The word ‘yad’ has been used in the verse of tayammum —*so wipe your faces and your hands*(5:5)— for the hand.”
Some scholars agreed with Ibn Abi Da’ud but others disagreed and said: “Cut the thief’s yad from the elbow.”
Mu‘tasim: “What is your proof?”
The scholars: “The word ‘yad’ has been used in the verse of wudhu —*wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows* (5:5)— for the fore-arm.”

Then Mu‘tasim turned towards Imam Muhammad at-Taqi (a.s.) and asked his opinion. The Imam first declined to give his view because he was aware of the court’s politics. But when Mu‘tasim insisted, the Imam finally said, “All these gentlemen are mistaken because only the [four] fingers have to be cut.”
Mu‘tasim: “What is your proof?”

The Imam (a.s.): “The Prophet (s.a.w.) has said that sajdah is done on seven parts of the body: forehead, palms, knees and two big toes [of the feet]. If a thief’s hand or forearm is cut, then it would not be possible for him to do the sajdah whereas All□h has said, ‘And verily the mas□jid [the body parts on which sajdah is done] belong to All□h...;’ and what belongs to All□h should not be cut.”

The caliph liked the answer of the Imam and ordered that the four fingers of the thief be cut.

This extraordinary event, in the public’s view at Mu‘tasim’s court, proved the superiority of the Imams of Ahlu ’l-Bayt. It, however, also created an extreme feeling of jealousy and hatred in the heart of Ibn Abi Da’ud.

On finding an appropriate moment, Ibn Abi Da’ud cautioned the caliph against inadvertantly promoting Imam Muhammad at-Taqi (a.s.) by publicly following his view and rejecting those of the other scholars. He filled the caliph’s ears to the extent that the caliph started looking at the Imam as a threat to his own

caliphate.

During the last days of Dhul Qa'dah 220 A.H., the Imam was poisoned by his wife, the niece of Mu'tasim, and he died as a martyr. His body was buried next to his grandfather's grave in the Qurayshi cemetary in Baghdad which is now known as Kādhimayn.

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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 Nahum: Hazrat Imam Muhammad al-Jawad* (*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 46

Question 1: [10 points]
True or False:
(a) Imam Muhammad at-Taqi was born in 195 A.H.

(b) Imam at-Taqi became the Imam at age of ten.

(c) The Shi'as were very happy with the birth of Imam at-Taqi; but some became concerned when his imamate began at the age of eight.

(d) One hundred and eighty scholars came from Baghdad to meet their young Imam.

(e) Ishāq's prayer for a son was accepted before he even asked the Imam to pray.

(f) Imam at-Taqi was taken to Baghdad in 204 A.H.

(g) Ibn Abi Da'ud was the judge who prepared the question on hunting in the state of ihrām.

(h) None of the Imam's children were born from Ma'mun's daughter.

(i) The Imam was buried next to his grandfather in Kazimayn.

(j) Imam at-Taqi returned to Medina in 220 A.H.

Question 2: [20 points]
Give two examples from the Qur'ān which prove that young age or being a child is not an impediment in

the Divine representatives.

Question 3: [10 points]
Describe the motives of Ma'mun in giving the hand of his daughter to Imam Muhammad at-Taqi (a.s.).

1. When the husband says to his wife, "You are to me like the back of my mother," it is not permissible for him to have sexual relationship with his wife until he atones by fasting for two successive months, or if that is not possible, then feeding sixty poor people. Uttering such a statement is known as zih□r.

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