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Question 2 : What does “Shi‘ah” mean?

Reply: In Arabic “Shi‘ah” literally means “follower”. The Glorious Qur’an states:

وإنَّ من شيعته لإبراهيم.

“Indeed Abraham was among his followers {Shi‘ah}.”[1]

But the Muslims use the word “Shi‘ah” to mean the group of people who believe that prior to his demise, the Prophet (S) had designated his successor and the caliph of the Muslims in numerous occasions such as the day known as “Ghadir” on Dhu’l-Hijjah 18, 10 AH and in a mammoth assembly (of Muslims) he (S) appointed him as the political, intellectual and religious authority after him (S).

To elucidate, after the Holy Prophet (S), the *Muhajirun*[2] and the *Ansar*[3] were divided into two groups:

1. A group believed that the Prophet of Allah (S) did not ignore the question of caliphate and he designated ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (*‘a*)—the first person who believed in him (S)—as his successor.

This group is composed of *Muhajirun* and *Ansar* with all the leading figures of the Bani Hashim[4] and a number of great Companions {*sahabah*}[5] such as Salman al-Farsi, Abu Dharr, Miqdad, Khabbab ibn Art, and the like. They remained firm in their belief and were called the “Shi‘ah of ‘Ali (*‘a*)”.

Of course, this appellation has been given by the Holy Prophet (S) himself during his lifetime to the followers of the Commander of the Faithful (*‘a*). While pointing to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (*‘a*), he said:

"والذي نفسي بيده إن هذا وشيعته لهم الفائزون يوم القيامة."

“By Him in Whose hand my life is, verily this man (‘Ali) and his Shi‘ah shall be the triumphant on the Day of Resurrection.”[6]

Therefore, “Shi‘ah” means a group of Muslims of the early period of Islam who, on account of the belief

that *wilayah* {guardianship}7 is based on revelation {*tansisi*}, are given this appellation, and this group has remained faithful to the Prophet's Household {*Ahl al-Bayt*} (*'a*) until today.

From this, we realize the station and position of the Shi'ah, and in this way the groundless statement of some ignorant or spiteful concocters who claim that Shi'ism is a product of the later periods, becomes clear. For further information on the history of the Shi'ah, one may refer to such books as *Asl ash-Shi'ah wa Usuluha*, *Al-Muraja'at*, and *A'yan ash-Shi'ah*.

2. Another group believed that the station of caliphate is an electoral position. As such, they paid allegiance to Abubakr and later on, they were known as the "Ahl as-Sunnah" or "Sunni".

The result was that notwithstanding the fact that these two Muslim sects have so many common views about the roots of religion, they have different attitudes toward the question of caliphate and succession to the Prophet. The members of each of the two groups were from among the *Muhajirun* and *Ansar*.

1. Surah as-Saffat 37:83.
2. Muhajirun: a title given to the Muslims of Mecca who accompanied the Prophet (S) in his hijrah (migration) to Medina. {Trans.}
3. Ansar: a title given to the Muslims of Medina who received the Prophet (S) and the Muslims of Mecca who migrated (hijrah) to Medina. {Trans.}
4. Bani Hashim: a clan in Mecca to which the Prophet and his descendants belong. {Trans.}
5. Companions {sahabah}: it refers to the Companions of the Prophet (S). In earlier times, the term was given only to his close friends who had close contact with him. Later, the term was extended to include the believers who had seen him, eventhough it was for a brief moment or at an early age. {Trans.}
6. Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti, Ad-Durr al-Manthur, vol. 6, on the commentary of Surah al-Bayyinah 98:7:
إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصّالِحَاتِ أُوْلئِكَ هُمْ خَيْرُ الْبَرِيَّةِ

"Indeed those who have faith and do righteous deeds—it is they who are the best of creatures."

7. For further information about the idea of guardianship {wilayah} and the guardian {wali}, see Murtada Mutahhari, Wilayah: The Station of the Master, trans. Yahya Cooper (Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Services, 1982). {Trans.}

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