

Background article: Sources, The Family of the Prophet

Love for the Family of the Prophet

The Arabic term used in the Qur'an *Ahl al-Bayt* literally means “the Family of the Household” and is normally translated as “the Family of the Prophet”. As such, the members of the Ahl al-Bayt are to be loved by all Muslims. It is a characteristic of Prophets that they do not ask for any reward for their services [e.g., Noah Q. 26:109, Lot Q. 26:164, and Shu'ayb Q. 26:180]. Muhammad likewise sought no reward except that the Muslims should love his Ahl al-Bayt, not for their own sakes but for the sake of God, whose servants they are [Q. 42:23]. Such love for the Prophet and his family brings a reward to the believer, a growth in knowledge and a deeper love of God [Q. 34:47]. Thus both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims are committed to love the Ahl al-Bayt.

Amongst Sunni Muslims, the Ahl al-Bayt certainly includes his daughter, Fatima, and her husband, who was also Muhammad's cousin, Ali, and their two sons Hasan and Husayn, but many Sunnis will include under this term the wives of Muhammad and other members of his wider family. For the Shi'a, the term has a restricted meaning, referring only to Muhammad, Fatima, Ali, Hasan and Husayn. This is based on their understanding of verses of the Qur'an, certain Hadith and events in the life of Muhammad.

The Ahl al-Bayt in Shi'a understanding

In the year 631, a Christian delegation from the settlement of Najran came to Madina and entered into a discussion with Muhammad about the person and nature of Jesus. The debate was to be resolved by both groups coming into the presence of God with their families and invoking the curse of God on whoever was not telling the truth. The critical challenge is recorded in the Qur'an: “Come! Let us call our sons and your sons (*abna' ana*), our women and your women (*nisa' ana*) and ourselves and yourselves (*anfus ana* literally our souls), then let us pray earnestly and call down God's curse upon the liars” [Q. 3:61].

The next morning Muhammad went out to face the challenge. He took with him his grandsons, Hasan and Husayn, the two sons of Ali and Fatima (it was common in that culture to refer to one's grandsons as one's sons and Muhammad had no living son at this time). With them he took their mother, his daughter Fatima (our women). It is significant here that he had nine wives alive at that time but did not take any of them. Finally he took with him Ali (our soul or our *nafs*). The Christian delegation did not go through with the challenge when they saw that Muhammad was prepared to risk himself and his family in this affair. This constitutes for the Shi'a a clear identification of these five people as the Ahl al-Bayt.

There are many accounts of the relationship of Muhammad with the other four members of the family. He is reported to have said that “Ali is my *nafs*.” The term *nafs* here can have meanings like soul or inner self. Ali is thus understood to bear the same inner light that was in Muhammad; they were almost like two faces of the same coin. Again Muhammad is reported as saying “I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate.” This indicates the function that Ali had of guiding people to the truth and making clear the hidden meanings of the Qur'an. Ali is characterised as being of exceptional wisdom in all matters relating to the way of Islam. In a Hadith, the Prophet said, “Wisdom is divided into ten parts: nine parts are given to Ali and the other one is distributed amongst the rest of the people.” Fatima is spoken of as “the leader of the women of Paradise.” Further there is a Hadith in which Muhammad said, “Fatima is part of me. Whoever offends her, offends me, whoever offends me, offends God, whoever offends God, his place is in Hellfire.” The closeness of father and daughter can be seen in the touching account of Muhammad on his deathbed telling her that he was soon to die. She wept with grief. Then he told her that she would be the first of his family to die after him and she smiled with joy. Fatima lived only a few months after the death of her father. Finally, there are many incidents of Muhammad playing with his grandsons and seeking to have them close to him. On one occasion, one of them even rode on his shoulders during the formal prayers. He spoke of them as “the leaders of the youths of Paradise.”

An incident in the life of Muhammad and his family was the occasion for the revelation of a crucial verse in Shi'a understanding. The Prophet was covered by a cloak or blanket and then was joined under it by Hasan, Husayn, Fatima and Ali. The following verse was revealed at this time, “Indeed God desires to repel all impurity from you, O People of the Household (Ahl al-Bayt), and purify you with a thorough purification” [Q. 33:33]. In Shi'a understanding, the term Ahl al-Bayt refers exclusively to these five people and their descendants, the later Imams. They are referred to by the Arabic term *ma'sum*, which is best translated as “the sinless ones” or by the technical term “the impeccables”, which includes the concept of being infallible or incapable of error in their lives and teaching. The five members of the Ahl al-Bayt gathered under the blanket were born sinless and remained so throughout their lives. This “verse of the purification” is the divine proclamation of their status, rendering them as “the best of creation”.

The Shi'a hold that Ali was the first male Muslim and the constant companion of Muhammad. He and Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, were in the best position to imbibe the spirit of the message of Islam as well as the details of the Qur'an and the way that it was put into practice by Muhammad. This, combined with their God-given status as impeccables, made them the best equipped guides of the community. It is recorded in Shi'a sources that in the months between the death of Muhammad and her own death, Fatima was visited by the Angel Gabriel, who brought her comfort and imparted to her knowledge from the unseen world of God, including knowledge of future events. These revelations were recorded by Ali in a book, the *Mushaf of Fatima*. This knowledge and this book were passed on to their two sons Hasan and Husayn and later into the keeping of the subsequent Imams. This visitation of the

angel to Fatima is a reminder of Gabriel's visit to Mary, the mother of Jesus [Q. 19:17-21]. Mary shared with Fatima the status of being amongst the highest of creation: those who are purified and a blessing to humankind [Q. 3:42]. Both women received messages from God via the angel and conveyed the knowledge of their hearts to their sons.

There are many Hadith of the Prophet in the Shi'a collections in which he spoke about the role of the Ahl al-Bayt after his death. He said, "Stars save people from being drowned and my household saves people from disagreements and conflicts". Again, "Be aware that surely the parable of my household amongst you is like the ship of Noah, whoever embarked on the ship of Noah was saved and whoever refused to do so was drowned". Finally, "Whoever enters by their association with the Ahl al-Bayt will be forgiven by God". These Hadith make it clear that the Ahl al-Bayt are to have the role of guiding the Muslim community, interpreting the Qur'an and authentic Sunna of the Prophet, and being a blessing leading to forgiveness and Paradise after the Prophet's death. He spoke of them as "his trust" and "a partner for the Qur'an".

The most explicit Hadith of Muhammad in this regard is called the Hadith of the Two Most Precious Things. Muhammad said, "I am leaving amongst you two most precious things, the Book of God and the Ahl al-Bayt, as long as you hold fast to them you will not go astray. These two things will not separate from each other until they reach me near the fountain (in Paradise) on the Day of Judgement". The Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt are like the two rails of a railway track to lead humankind through this life to Paradise. They run in parallel; if the rails separate from each other, then the train could not run along the railway track. If only one rail is present, then the train cannot run at all. This was God's plan for humanity. As the Qur'an says, "A faithful man or woman may not, when God and his Prophet have decided on a matter, have any option in their decision, and whoever disobeys God and his Prophet has certainly strayed into manifest error" [Q. 33:36].

In majority Shi'a understanding then, the Ahl al-Bayt consist of Muhammad, Fatima and the line of twelve Imams descended from Ali and Fatima. They constitute an infallible, sinless, inspired source of authority during their lives and for all time. The twelfth Imam, who is currently alive on earth but hidden from human sight, will return as Imam al-Mahdi. During the time until his return, Muslims are required to hold fast to their teaching so that he finds them on the true path that they have laid out, which leads to Paradise.

Muhammad summarised his closeness to the Ahl al-Bayt by saying in a Hadith in which they are referred to as 'you': "I am at war with those with whom you are at war and at peace with those with whom you are at peace". This love for the Ahl al-Bayt is shown by the Shi'a practice of making visits to pray to God at the shrines that have been erected to mark their burial places (*ziyara*). Each year is punctuated with days to remember important events in their lives, such as their births and deaths. This is especially important as the first eleven Imams are all regarded as martyrs. As they were all sinless, they died a death of pure innocence for the sake of God, the truth and

their people. In some way they have absorbed some of the suffering due to sinners, so part of the visitation of the grave includes the rite of weeping for their unmerited sufferings.

The Ahl al-Bayt amongst Ismaili Shi'a Muslims

The Ismaili Shi'a, who have their own line of Imams after the commonly shared first six after Muhammad, also love the Ahl al-Bayt and extend that love to their own line of Imams. Their Imams also represent a privileged infallible source of authority within their communities.

One branch, the Musta'lian, today represented by the Sulaymani, Alavi and Daudi Bohras, hold that the twenty-first Imam went into occultation, or hidden existence, in 1132. During this time of occultation, it is the duty of the community to follow the way of life laid out by the Imams, led by the Da'i Mutlaqs, who act as the caretakers or guardians of that way, until the eventual reappearance of the descendent of the Imam who went into hiding.

The other principal branch, the Nizari, today represented by the followers of the Aga Khan, hold that the earth will never be left without a Living Imam, who is accessible to his followers. The Nizari Ismailis uniquely hold that the Aga Khan, as Living Imam, has the responsibility to lead his followers into a way of following Islam that is adapted to the times and circumstances in which they live. As the living, divinely-appointed Imam, he is inspired infallibly to interpret the inner meaning of the Qur'an and the Islamic way of life.