

Background article: Sources, Sunni and Shi'a: Succession and Imams

What happened after Muhammad? The Shi'a View

Here we look at what happened after the death of Muhammad according to the Shi'a view. The Shi'a are the minority community within Islam, but being a minority does not render the Shi'a wrong any more than being a majority renders the Sunnis right. It is for Muslims and their scholars to judge such questions under God; the intention here is to understand both views. It is not part of the Shi'a understanding that their perspective on Islam was the path laid down by God for a group within the Muslim community, but rather that this was God's plan for the whole Muslim community.

It is crucial to remember that there is one common text of the Qur'an, to which all Muslims defer. Differences of interpretation lead to the range of positions taken by Muslims and not a difference of Qur'anic text. In the same way, many of the critical incidents in the life of Muhammad are commonly agreed to have happened, but they are given different meanings by various groups. A central question, as will become clear as we progress, is who has the authority and necessary capacity correctly to interpret texts and events. Is such interpretation restricted to those with God-given privileged knowledge or open to any believer with the necessary intellectual tools?

The Shi'a today are geographically concentrated in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain, where they form the majority of the Muslims. They also form significant minorities in the Lebanon, Syria, the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. They are also present in those countries to which Muslims have migrated, such as East Africa, Britain, Canada and the United States of America. In total, they form between ten and fifteen per cent of the worldwide Muslim population. They are sub-divided into various groups but those sub-divisions do not form part of our discussion here. We will concentrate on the majority school amongst the Shi'a, who recognise a line of twelve divinely-appointed Imams, the Ithna Ashari.

An established pattern

The Qur'an speaks of Abraham as not only a prophet but also an Imam [Q. 2:124]; the latter term is understood in Shi'a usage to indicate that, in addition to his spiritual role, he had political, legal and military leadership as well. Moses was given his brother Haroun (Aaron) as a co-worker and minister (*wazir*), who was to take over the leadership of the community after his death [Q. 28:33-35; 19:53; 25:35; 7:142]. Haroun however was a prophet in his own right. Jesus had his inner circle around him under the leadership of Simon Peter. It seems that there is a divinely-ordained pattern of successors to certain prophets being charged with leadership after them, to carry on their work and apply their message. In the case of Muhammad, he was the last of the prophets, so there is no question of another prophet to succeed him, but what about a *wazir* or minister to carry on his work?

Muhammad and Ali

After the initial revelation of the Qur'an in the Cave of Hira, there was a period during which Muhammad spoke of his experience only to his wife Khadija and his cousin Ali. They believed in his message and were the first Muslims. Later Muhammad was told to summon his family, tell them about his prophethood and ask them to follow him. The decisive step was taken by Ali, who declared his faith in the prophethood of Muhammad. Muhammad announced that from that time onwards, Ali was to be his brother, successor, *wazir* and the executor of his will. The Qur'an says that Muhammad spoke not out of his own will but by the will of God [Q. 53:3]. Here then was Muhammad declaring in the name of God at the start of his mission that Ali was to succeed him. He was to be to Muhammad as Haroun was to Moses, except that he was not a prophet. From that time onwards Ali was his constant companion, imbibing the message of the Qur'an from the life and words of the Prophet.

This divine appointment (*nass*) of Ali is also confirmed in an episode reported in the Qur'an. A poor man entered the mosque in Madina to beg for alms whilst some people were doing voluntary prayers. The only one to respond to his request was Ali, who was bowing in prayer when he was approached and held out his hand to the man indicating that he should take his ring as charity. A verse of the Qur'an was revealed at this time [Q. 5:55] that spoke of the "guardian with authority" (*wali*) in the community being God, then Muhammad, then "the faithful one who maintains the prayer and gives charity whilst bowing down." Muhammad confirmed that this was God's designation of Ali as his successor.

About three months before the death of Muhammad, he led the Muslim community on the only Hajj pilgrimage that he performed. By this time, almost all the Qur'an had been revealed and the Muslim practice of the community was well established. All the practices and teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet had been conveyed to the community. On the way back from this pilgrimage, on the journey from Makka to Madina, the Angel Gabriel (Jibril) appeared to Muhammad with the command to "convey what has been conveyed to you or else you have done nothing" [Q. 5:67]. What could this definitive command be at this late stage of Muhammad's mission, when the message had been so comprehensively conveyed? Muhammad halted the community at an oasis called Ghadir Khumm. This was the point at which the roads separated and some had already gone on their way; Muhammad called them back. The whole pilgrim body was thus assembled; by tradition some 72,000 Muslims. Muhammad mounted a rock so that he could be seen and heard. He raised the hand of Ali and said that all those who accepted him, Muhammad, as their master or leader (*maula*) should take Ali as their *maula* after his death.

This was the clear designation by the infallible Prophet that Ali should be his successor. All the Muslims who were present pledged their allegiance to Ali at this time as the Commander of the Faithful (*Amir al-Mu'minin*). On this occasion, the verse of the Qur'an "this day I have perfected your religion" was revealed [Q. 5:3].

Muhammad then spoke this prayer: "My Lord, be the friend of whoever is Ali's friend, and the enemy of whoever is Ali's enemy; love whoever loves him and hate whoever hates him; help whoever helps him and abandon whoever abandons him, whoever he may be. Let those who are present convey this to those who are absent." This day is commemorated annually on 'Id Ghadir Khumm.

The Family of the Prophet

Ali was not alone in being set aside by God in a special way. When Muhammad challenged the Christian delegation from Najran to mutual cursing to determine who was telling the truth, they were to bring their families with them [Q. 3:61]: their women, their sons and their souls (*nafs*). When Muhammad appeared, he was accompanied only by Fatima (his daughter), Hasan and Husayn (the grandsons of Muhammad and children of Fatima and Ali), and Ali. These five are then seen to comprise the Family of the Prophet or Ahl al-Bayt. The term *nafs* is important here as someone's *nafs* refers to their inner self, or their soul. Ali is here identified with the *nafs* of Muhammad; thus Ali was the bearer of the inner light that dwelt also in Muhammad. As Muhammad himself put it: "I am the city of knowledge and Ali is the gate."

In another incident recorded in the Qur'an, Muhammad was covered by a cloak or blanket, under which he called successively Hasan, Husayn, Fatima and Ali. The following verse of the Qur'an was then revealed: "Indeed God desires to repel all impurity from you, O Ahl al-Bayt, and purify you with a thorough purification" [Q. 33:33]. The term Ahl al-Bayt occurs on other occasions in the Qur'an with the pronoun "you" in the feminine form referring to the wives of Muhammad. Here it occurs with the "you" in masculine form. In Arabic, the feminine refers to females alone but the masculine is used for any number of females but including at least one male. This gives a clear indication of who are meant by this verse and, in Shi'a usage, the term Ahl al-Bayt refers exclusively to these five people and their descendants, the later Imams.

This incident is understood by the Shi'a as God's designation of these five people as the highest of all creation, those "drawn close to God" [Q. 56:7-11] and thus that all ultimate earthly leaders within the Muslim community must descend exclusively from this family. The descendants were the line of the later Imams. This "verse of the purification" is understood as God's declaration that the Ahl al-Bayt were without sin from their birth and throughout their lives. From this comes the theological term the *ma'sum* or "sinless ones" (more technically, we can say "the impeccables," which includes the concept of being infallible or without error in their lives and teaching). This status is extended to all of the nine impeccable Imams that followed on; thus we often read of the Fourteen Impeccables, being Muhammad, Fatima and the twelve Imams.

The on-going Imamate

As Muhammad was sinless and infallibly declared God's designation of Ali as his successor, so Ali in turn infallibly designated his first son, Hasan, to succeed him as Imam or the divinely-appointed leader of the community. Hasan in turn infallibly designated his brother Husayn as the third Imam, and so on through the generations until the twelfth Imam, who went into a hidden existence in 941 and remains alive today as the Hidden Imam. He is the Imam of the Present Age, still present and active "like the sun hidden behind the clouds." It is this twelfth Imam who will return in the last phase of earth's existence as Imam al-Mahdi, at which time he will rid the earth of injustice and rule for a period of time in uprightness and truth.

In Shi'a understanding, the Imams shared in the inner light of purity and knowledge that dwelt within Muhammad. They are not prophets but they are the closest to them. They do not receive direct revelation from God (*wahy*), as did the prophets, but they are the bearers of divine inspiration (*ilham*). Just as Muhammad was given knowledge that can only come directly from God, esoteric knowledge, so too the Imams share in this knowledge, which enables them to interpret the Qur'an and Islamic way of life infallibly and thus give guidance to the community with an authority that no other people possess. They are able to report and interpret the Hadith of the Prophet with an assurance that is unique.

There are many Hadith of the Prophet 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 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].

What happened after the death of Muhammad?

Ali, as the closest male relative and executor of the Prophet's will, was occupied with the funeral arrangements when the elders of the community met to decide that Abu Bakr should take on the leadership of the community. Although Ali and other members of the Prophet's wider family reminded them of God's and the Prophet's designation of Ali to succeed him, they did not avail. To have pressed the cause would have led to bloodshed and so Ali withdrew from the dispute. Similarly when Abu Bakr nominated Umar to succeed him. Ali was part of the electoral college that was appointed to decide on the successor to Umar but, as the others insisted on a precondition that the practices of Abu Bakr and Umar must be followed by the successor, a precondition that Ali could not accept as certain practices established by the Qur'an and *sunna* had already been changed by these two, Ali had to decline to accept a nomination. It was only when Uthman was assassinated that Ali came into his rightful position as the Imam of the Muslim community. Those who supported Ali's rightful succession were called the Party of Ali, the *Shi'a-t Ali*, or the Shi'a.