

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

The Shi'a Imams as spiritual guides

It is obvious to us all on reflection that not all human beings are equally endowed with knowledge, piety and spiritual qualities. Human beings are all called equally to worship, obey, serve and love God but we need help in order to do this. The first guidance for all humankind is in the form of the scriptures that have been sent by God but these scriptures need to be put into practice by human beings. These scriptures were sent to prophets, who were endowed with the highest gifts of spirituality, knowledge, piety, courage and justice. These prophets had such a refined sense of moral knowledge given by God that they realised the consequences of sin and so did not sin in any way from birth until death. Similarly, this knowledge removed any sense of doubt or uncertainty from their minds. Such were the people that God sent as prophets to guide humankind in a chain from Adam to Muhammad.

Some of the prophets sent by God had not only spiritual authority on the earth but also political, legal and military authority. We can take the example of Abraham, for whom the Qur'an uses not only the term Prophet but also Imam [Q. 2:124]. Moses felt the need of a co-worker and God indicated that his brother Aaron (in Arabic Haroun) was also a prophet. He would work alongside Moses, be his minister (in Arabic *wazir*) and indeed take on the leadership of the community after the death of Moses [Q. 28:33-35; 19:53; 25:35; 7:142]. Indeed, the Qur'an tells us that God will raise up Imams amongst the Children of Israel as guides [Q. 32:24; 21:73]. In a similar way, the Prophet Jesus gathered an inner circle of disciples around him, with their leader Simon Peter, who would guide the community after his ascension into heaven.

The need for Guides

Why do human beings need such guides present in the community? In the same way that prophets were needed to interpret the scriptures with authority based on the light of knowledge given to them by God, so all generations of human beings need the presence of an infallible guide. There is a natural forgetfulness in human beings and the pull of the ego can cause them to go astray. Because of this human weakness, God has provided sinless, infallible guides who can lead the community of humankind with authority and certainty. It is a mercy from God that human society will never be without such a guide or else, left to themselves, they would be bound to go astray. Under their guidance, men and women are able to draw ever-closer to God until the ultimate closeness of the life of Paradise. In Shi'a understanding, from the time of Adam onwards until the present day, the world has never been without such Imams to provide certain guidance to human beings and guide them in their spiritual ascent.

Prophet Muhammad received the last scripture revealed for humankind, the Qur'an. Direct revelation ended with his death but guidance continued through the chain of Imams. They act as a guide (*hadi*) and also as a proof of God (*hujja*). The Qur'an

commands people to obey God and his prophet, Muhammad, and “those possessing authority” [Q. 4:59] who, in Shi'a understanding, are the Imams. They act as protectors for humankind and provide right guidance. God would be unjust if humankind were left without such infallible guides. They draw their guidance from the Qur'an, from the teaching of Muhammad and by a direct illumination from God through the divine light or the Holy Spirit. Therefore they are possessed of knowledge and spiritual excellence that is beyond the scope of the mass of humanity.

The two lights

The Shi'a believe that God created a light before the creation of the material world. This light was the cause and instrument of the rest of creation. This light was the light of prophethood and guidance that was borne by Adam, as the first prophet, and then was passed through all the chain of prophets and Imams throughout the ages. The original light is held to have been in two parts, one of which comes to its final resting place in Muhammad, the last prophet, and the other to its final resting place in Ali, the first Imam after Muhammad. The two lights were ultimately united in the womb of Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad and wife of Ali, when she conceived her sons Hasan and Husayn, the second and third Imams of the Muslim line. Thereafter they were passed on to the remaining Imams, who were descended from them. These two lights can be thought of as the Word of God and the Spirit of God, thus providing certain knowledge for humankind. This line of descent of Muhammad through Fatima comprises the Ahl al-Bayt, the Family of the Prophet, who are referred to in the Qur'an as the highest (*illiyun*) of all creation [Q. 83:19].

The Imams are not the bearers of direct revelation (*wahy*) from God, as in the scriptures sent to the prophets alone. Rather their light of divine guidance is of another form, generally called inspiration (*ilham*), such as is referred to in the Qur'an as being sent to the mother of Moses [Q. 28:7], Mary, the mother of Jesus [Q. 3:45] and the bee [Q. 16:68]. In one tradition, this is referred to as being “like a pillar of light descending from heaven to the Imam.”

The light of interpretation

The prophets brought exoteric (manifest, outer, *zahiri*) knowledge from God in the scriptures, but the Imams brought esoteric (hidden, inner, *batini*) knowledge and thus had privileged knowledge that cannot be accessed by the masses. In the Shi'a tradition, there is reference to additional books of guidance, one derived directly from Muhammad and another containing wisdom imparted to Fatima by the Angel Gabriel after the Prophet's death. Included in this knowledge is an awareness of the Greatest Name of God, which has not yet been made known. The Qur'an says of itself that some of its verses have a clear and definitive meaning but for others the meaning is ambiguous or metaphorical; the meaning of these verses is known only to those “firmly grounded in knowledge,” who are understood to be the Imams [Q. 3:7]. If those who are not endowed with this knowledge attempt to interpret these verses, it

will lead to confusion; therefore the need for the Imams, who alone are given the light to interpret them.

Reading the Qur'an from the perspective of the Imams

There are many verses in the Qur'an that are interpreted in the Shi'a tradition as indirect references to the Imams. They are: "Signs of God" [Q. 29:49], the "Straight Path" [Q. 1:6], the "Bounty of God" [Q. 14:28-29], the "Firmest Handle" [Q. 2:256], the "Rope of God" [3:102], the "Light of God" [Q. 64:8], the "Trust" [Q. 33:72], the "Guides of Humankind" [Q. 7:181], the "Possessors of Knowledge" [Q. 3:7], the "Inheritors of the Book" [Q. 35:32], the "Possessors of Authority" [Q. 4:59] and many other such titles.

These titles make it clear why the Imams are essential to correct following of the guidance of God and growing in piety and wisdom. Such functions could not be fulfilled by sinful human beings, no matter how pious, or by people functioning only with natural knowledge, no matter how wise. In this way, the Shi'a understand the Imams as a necessary blessing from God to guide humankind. They are without sin and without error (*ma'sum*) and thus the most excellent in spiritual knowledge, conduct and closeness to God, so that only they can serve as infallible guides to others.

The privileged knowledge of how to live a fully Muslim way of life was accumulated by some of the Imams and transferred to others. Ali, for example, was the constant companion of Muhammad from the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'an throughout his life and thus best placed to observe the Prophet's implementation of the scripture and to learn directly from him the inner meaning of its message. He and Fatima could pass this on to their sons, Hasan and Husayn. They in turn could hand on this knowledge to their successors. The choice of successor did not rest with the Imams themselves but rather by divine command; each in turn appointed the one who was destined to be the Imam after them. In the case of the ninth and tenth Imams, who were appointed to the Imamate as children, there is an understanding of a miraculous transfer of this accumulated knowledge. All this is in addition to the direct divine illumination (*ilham*) through the inner light that they bore.

This combination of accumulated and divinely inspired knowledge can be seen in the teachings of the Imams that have been preserved and handed down. They are the best guarantors of Hadith from Muhammad and any chain of transmission that includes one of the infallible Imams can be taken as a confirmed, authentic Hadith. Even later Imams, who were born long after the Prophet's death, were able to give a degree of assurance about a Hadith that carried an authority above that of any historical chain. Their own teachings convey a degree of certainty that comes from their exalted status. This gives the Shi'a community the benefit of an additional three hundred years of infallible guidance after the death of Muhammad.

The centrality of the Imams

From the foregoing, we can see that the doctrine of the Imams (*walaya*) is central to the Shi'a understanding of Islam. Without their guidance, human beings are unable to navigate their way through this life and find their destination of growing progressively closer to the infinite God in the life hereafter. Muhammad is reported to have spoken of their role as being like the stars that save people from being drowned, so by holding fast to the Imams people are saved from being lost in confusion and error. The theme of salvation is emphasised by another Hadith that uses the example of the ark of Noah; those who entered it were saved, while those who rejected it were lost, so whoever holds fast to the Imams will be saved by that association and their sins will be forgiven.

The term *walaya* is important here as it comes from the Arabic term *wali*, which can mean both master and friend. So the Imams are both masters and spiritual friends to those who follow them. They guide people aright and initiate them into the hidden (*batini*) meanings of the Qur'an and way of Islam. They are a channel of God's grace in this life and will be a friend to their followers on the Day of Judgement. The Qur'an speaks of the prophets being given permission by God to intercede for their followers on the Day of Judgement. In Shi'a understanding, just as the Imams played an indispensable role in guiding people in life, they will also share in the role of intercession at the judgement [Q. 4:64; 12:97-98; 63:5].

A critical point is reached in the history of the Imams in 941 when the twelfth Imam entered into the Greater Occultation in which he lives a hidden existence out of contact with humankind until the day of his re-emergence. Although he is hidden from our sight, he is not absent or else the world would be without a source of divine guidance. The phrase is used that he is "like the sun that is hidden behind the clouds": the sun still shines and thus life on earth continues but we cannot see it when it is hidden. In this way, the twelfth Imam is currently both the Hidden Imam and the Imam of the Present Age and Shi'a will pledge their allegiance to him and pray for his imminent return. When he returns, it will be as Imam al-Mahdi, the Rightly-Guided One, who will bring in an era of justice, uprightness and peace on the earth, which will last until the end of the world.