

Transcript: Sources, Sunni and Shi'a: Succession and Imams

As one might imagine, the death of the Prophet threw the Muslim community into chaos. Some refused to believe it was true; others wondered what would happen now that he was dead. It was clear that he was the last in the chain of the Prophets and so whoever succeeded him would not be another Prophet. However, just as Muhammad had been the spiritual, legal, political and military leader of the community, so all four responsibilities were to rest upon the shoulders of his successors.

The Sunni view on succession to Muhammad

It is no surprise to us that sometimes the events of history are told differently by different groups. The group that became the majority amongst Muslims is called the Sunnis, who make up about eighty-five per cent of Muslims today all over the world. Sunnis believe that neither the Qur'an nor Muhammad said who was to succeed him nor did he lay down a procedure for selecting his successor.

For the Sunnis, as long as the leader ruled under God, following the guidance of the Qur'an and Sunna, it was a role that could be filled by any man, based on his piety and wisdom. Leadership was to be by merit – not by inheritance, birth or family.

Accordingly, a group of the leading figures in Madina selected Abu Bakr (d. 634), as the first Head of the Community after Muhammad. He had been one of Muhammad's closest companions and one of the earliest converts to Islam. In the last few days of his life, when he was very weak and ill, the Prophet asked Abu Bakr to lead the prayers. Indeed on one occasion Muhammad joined the congregation and prayed behind Abu Bakr. This is seen by the Sunnis as indicative that he was approved for collective leadership after Muhammad's death.¹ Abu Bakr was presented to the believers and accepted by a majority. He only lived a further two years. He appointed Umar as his successor.

Umar was accepted by a majority of believers and served as Caliph for ten years (634-644). Towards the end of his life, Umar nominated six prominent Companions who were to elect his successor from amongst themselves. They chose Uthman as the third Caliph (644-656). He was followed by Ali (d.661), the son-in-law and cousin of

¹ Sahl son of Sa'd Al-Sa'idi reported that the Messenger of God went to the family of Amr bin Auf for mediation. When the time for prayer came, the muezzin (one who calls to prayer) came to Abu Bakr and asked him to lead the prayer. Accordingly Abu Bakr began to lead the prayer, in the meantime the Messenger of God arrived back and he joined the rows for prayer. The people around the Prophet noticed this and started coughing in order to draw to Abu Bakr's attention the fact that the Messenger of God had arrived. Consequently he saw the Messenger of God, but the Messenger of God asked him to stay where he was. However Abu Bakr moved behind and the Prophet stepped forward and he continued the prayer. After the prayer was concluded the Prophet asked Abu Bakr, "Why did you not stay and lead the prayer when I asked you to do so?" Abu Bakr replied, "I did not deem it right to lead the prayer in your presence".

Muhammad, who was elected by the community. The leadership of the first four Caliphs was accepted by most of the community. They are called the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, or the *Rashidun*. The period of their leadership (632-661) is considered as a golden age – in contrast to the dynasties of rulers who came after them. These later Caliphs took up a more secular lifestyle and the Caliphate became the preserve of certain clans or families.

The first dynasty was the Umayyads, with their capital in Damascus, who held the Caliphate from 661 to 750. They were succeeded by the Abbasids (750-1258), who ruled over an extensive territory from their capital in Baghdad and later over a smaller area based in Cairo (1261-1517). The single Caliphate did not last long and was followed by a series of local empires including the Umayyads in Spain (756-1031), the Ottomans, based in Turkey but ruling over much of the Middle East (1280-1924), the Moghuls in India (1526-1858), the Safavids in Iran (1501-1765) and the Alawids in Morocco and West Africa (1631 onwards).

The Shi'a view on succession to Muhammad

A minority group among Muslims had a different approach to Muhammad's succession. Their name comes from the fact that they supported Ali's right to succeed the Prophet. Hence they became the Party of Ali, or *Shi'a-t Ali*, which is shortened to Shi'a.

According to them, the Qur'an refers to the succession to the Prophet in Q. 5:55.² This verse was revealed relating to an incident in which Ali gave away his ring in charity. Another verse speaks of the Family of the Prophet, the *Ahl al-Bayt*, being made pure and spotless [Q. 33:33, 3:61].³ This is held to be a reference to an incident in which Muhammad, his daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali, and their two sons Hasan and Husayn, were all purified by God, making them the highest of creation.

Further evidence in support of the Shi'a view of divine selection is provided by an incident which happened on the return journey from the Hajj shortly before Muhammad died. Muhammad called a halt at an oasis, where he raised the hand of

² Q. 5:55 Your guardian is God alone, his Messenger, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the *zakat* while bowing down.

³ Q. 33:33 Stay in your houses and do not expose yourselves as was done in the former [days of] ignorance. Perform the prayer and give the *zakat*, and obey God and his Messenger. Indeed God only desires to remove impurity from you, O People of the Household, and thoroughly purify you.

Q. 3:61 And whoever disputes with you concerning him [Jesus], after what has come to you of knowledge, say, "Come! Let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves. Then let us pray earnestly and place the curse of God on the liars!"

Ali and said publicly that whoever held him as their leader should regard Ali in a similar way.

This is taken by the Shi'a to be the appointment by Muhammad of Ali as his successor. The three men who were later to be acclaimed as the first three Rightly-Guided Caliphs, were present at this time and all then pledged allegiance to Ali.

Immediately after the death of Muhammad, Ali was engaged in the preparations for the burial of the Prophet's body. The group of Companions met and selected Abu Bakr to head the community. When Ali found out what had happened, he didn't protest. He felt it would be unworthy to claim the leadership. He did, however, make his position clear. Umar and later Uthman succeeded Abu Bakr. Then in 656, after the death of Uthman, Ali assumed the Caliphate.

The Shi'a Imams

In Shi'a terminology, the divinely appointed leaders of the community in succession to Muhammad are called Imams. To the Shi'a, Imam Ali was the first divinely appointed successor and the first three Rightly-Guided Caliphs had no right to this position.

The close relationship between Muhammad and Ali provides the Shi'a with a clear model of what an Imam should be. The Qur'an refers to Ali as Muhammad's *nafs*, which can be translated as something like 'soul' or 'inner self' [Q. 3:61].⁴ So Ali was seen as having the same inner light as Muhammad. In other words, he inherited from him the light of divine guidance.

This is why the Shi'a regard the divinely appointed Imams as infallible in interpreting the Qur'an and the Islamic way of life. They receive divine inspiration or *ilham* rather than direct revelation from God in the way that Muhammad did. This confers on them the supreme authority and knowledge to interpret the Shari'a in ways binding on the believers. The Imams were also sinless, possessing both spiritual and political authority.

All Imams come from the Family of the Prophet, as descendants of Fatima and Ali. Each Imam appointed his successor on the basis of piety and wisdom according to the guidance of God. This did not necessarily mean the eldest son, as in a monarchical system. The selected one is God's choice as inspired guide and is entitled to political authority, even if rejected by the community.

Hasan was appointed as the successor to Ali as the second Imam. The majority Sunnis followed Mu'awiya as the next Caliph. He went on to found the Umayyad dynasty,

⁴ Q. 3:61 And whoever disputes with you concerning him [Jesus], after what has come to you of knowledge, say, "Come! Let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves. Then let us pray earnestly and place the curse of God on the liars!"

which ruled from 661 to 750. Mu'awiya's capital was in Damascus, while the Shi'a were strongest around the city of Kufa in Iraq. The Shi'a objected to the corruption that they saw amongst the Umayyads and wanted to keep away from such practices to follow what they saw as the pure Islamic way of life as taught by Muhammad and Ali. Many Sunnis also objected to the corruption of the Umayyad dynasty.

After the death of Hasan (d. c.669), the Imamate passed to his brother Husayn (d.680). Husayn, as the grandson of the Prophet, was the victim in a tragedy which still resonates to this day and plays a huge part in the lives of Shi'a Muslims.

Husayn refused to pledge allegiance to the Umayyads in Damascus as this would have legitimated their rule. In 680, he was leading a party of Muslims from Makka towards Kufa when they were ambushed by an army of Umayyads at Karbala, in modern day Iraq. A siege and battle took place. The Umayyads, traditionally recorded at 30,000 men, vastly outnumbered Husayn and his companions, who amounted to some seventy-two men plus women and children. In the massacre which ensued, Husayn and the men were killed for not giving allegiance to Yazid, Mu'awiya's successor, and their bodies desecrated. The women and children were taken into captivity in Damascus. This was seen as a martyrdom in the cause of right and is commemorated today by ten days of deep mourning leading up to Ashura Day, the tenth day of the month of Muharram.

During these ten days, the events at Karbala are remembered, including, for example, Husayn's pleading with the Umayyads to spare the life of his infant son, Ali Asghar. They eventually shot the child with an arrow as he lay in his father's arms. On Ashura Day itself there is the re-enactment of the final battle and the death of Husayn. Shi'a Muslims are called on to re-dedicate themselves to absolute obedience to the divine will, even if this means becoming a martyr. This intensity of passionate mourning and commitment is often expressed in various cultures by striking the chest and in its more extreme form, people cutting themselves to show their willingness to shed their blood in the way of God if called upon.

Professor Michot, a Sunni scholar, speaks of the horror of every Muslim at the massacre of the Prophet's grandson:

Ashura (680), less than fifty years after the death of the Prophet: we have the community divided to a point where the grandson of the Prophet is killed by those who are supposed to lead the community. And this division of the community, and the massacre that it led to, remains a concern for every Muslim. Of course historically speaking, there is a mystery: we do not understand how it could have happened. But if we look at Ashura from a contemporary point of view, we see also the Muslim community being divided today between Sunnis and Shi'is. And we see other massacres being committed and this is something that we cannot accept at all. And so Ashura is there to remind us that Muslims should be united whatever their divergences because they all share the same belief in the unicity of God and in the messengership of

Muhammad (peace be upon him), and that is the most important. Everything else should be considered as irrelevant. And so Ashura remains until today, there to remind Muslims that unity is extremely important in Islam.

Shaykh Bahmanpour, a Shi'a scholar, emphasises the significance of Imam Husayn and his inspirational message:

The significance of the Day of Ashura is understood only if we understand the significance of Husayn, who was killed on the Day of Ashura. Husayn was the grandson of the Prophet but not an ordinary person, not an ordinary grandson: someone who had very, very high qualities of spirituality. Just akin to the spirituality of the Prophet himself. If we say that the love of the Prophet is an extension to the love of God, then the love of Husayn is an extension to the love of the Prophet, and therefore I think for every Muslim who loves the Prophet, love of Husayn should follow. And on that day, unfortunately this catastrophe happened; that Muslims, not knowing what they were doing, forgetting about all those favours bestowed upon them through their Prophet: they killed the grandson of the Prophet. It is significant in this sense and I think all Muslims should be really concerned about what happened at that moment in the history of Islam. However it is significant especially for Shi'ites in one other sense, and that is that Ashura has become an inspiration for them. A turning point, a watershed, from which they get inspiration throughout history: the way that they have to react against injustice, the way that they have to go beyond human mean needs and pleasures, and take a stance, wherever it is necessary, just like Husayn did.

Maulana Raza, another Sunni, speaks of all Muslims' love for the martyr Husayn:

Sunni Muslims also love and respect Imam Husayn because he belongs to the family of Prophet Muhammad and he has left tremendous heroic lessons through his sacrifice on the Day of Ashura. One of the lessons, I think, is very unique: through his *shahada*, his martyrdom, he has definitely defeated the concept of might being the right. Instead, through his blood, he established the fact that right is the might.

One of Husayn's sons, Ali ibn Husayn, (d.712/3) also known as Zayn ul-Abidin, was ill on the day of his father's death and so took no part in the battle. He survived to become the fourth Imam.

The majority of the Shi'a accepted the grandson of Husayn, Muhammad al-Baqir (d. either 732 or 743) as the fifth Imam. He was succeeded by Ja'far al-Sadiq (d.765), who became a renowned scholar and developed the particular Shi'a code for living, called the Ja'fari School.

After Imam Ja'far's death, a division arose about the succession and one group took Muhammad ibn Isma'il as the legitimate seventh Imam – so they are called Isma'ilis.

The Isma'ilis came to prominence as the rulers of the Fatimid dynasty based in Cairo (909-1171). One group amongst the Isma'ilis is the Bohra, now found mainly in India. The largest Isma'ili group, the Nizari Isma'ilis, still follow a Living Imam in direct line of succession, currently the Aga Khan. They emphasise the hidden meaning of the Qur'an that can only be interpreted by the Imam and thus have developed their Islamic understanding in new and particular ways.

The majority of the Shi'a took Musa al-Kazim (d.799) as the rightful seventh Imam and so the line of successors continued until the time of the eleventh Imam, Hasan al-Askari.

On the death of the eleventh Imam in 874, his young son Muhammad al-Qa'im became the twelfth Imam at the age of six. He appeared at his father's funeral and then immediately went into a sort of hidden existence or *ghayba* (occultation). This was in two phases. During the first or Lesser Occultation (874-941), the Hidden Imam, as he has become known, was in contact with a small number of selected leaders. In 941, he went into the Greater Occultation, in which he is beyond contact with all human beings, where he will remain until the beginning of the Last Days.

As the twelfth Imam is still alive, there can be no question of a continuation of the line of Imams and so this majority group amongst the Shi'a are called Ithna Ashari or Twelvers.

The doctrine of the divinely inspired Imams lies at the heart of the Shi'a tradition. There are Hadith attributed to Muhammad that speak of him having twelve worthy successors.⁵ The figure here reflects the symbolism of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles who followed Jesus. This idea is linked to another Hadith that said that Muhammad would leave after him two things of greatest value: the Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt.⁶

Combined with this is the interpretation of some verses of the Qur'an that speak of certain people as being "drawn close to God" [Q. 56:7-11].⁷ Amongst these were Mary, the mother of Jesus [Q. 3:42],⁸ who is spoken of as being purified, truthful, a

⁵ It is reported from the Prophet (pbuh) that, "Islam continues with its dignity until twelve successors".

⁶ It is reported from the Prophet (pbuh), "O people, I am leaving two things that if you stick to them you will not deviate; the Book of God (the Qur'an) and my family, the members of my household".

⁷ Q. 56:7-11 You will be three groups: The People of the Right Hand - and [how to describe] the People of the Right Hand? And the People of the Left Hand - and [how to describe] the People of the Left Hand? As for the Foremost Ones, the Foremost Ones: those are the ones brought near [to God].

⁸ Q. 3:42 And when the angels said, "O Mary! God has chosen you and purified you, and chosen you above the women of the worlds.

witness and a blessing to humankind. The Qur'an speaks of four groups who are thus "favoured by God:" Prophets, the truthful, the witnesses and the righteous [Q. 4:69].⁹ In Shi'a thought, the Imams are "the truthful." They are not Prophets but closest to them. They are trustees or inheritors of their light. They are truthful in word, action and intention, and are free from all doubt and inconsistency. They share in all the knowledge that Muhammad possessed, which they inherited from him [Q. 3:7, 29:49, 34:6].¹⁰ God has removed the veils of their hearts so that they can access the inner dimensions of faith. Thus they are the infallible guides of humankind in succession to Muhammad.

The first Imam, Ali, was declared such by Muhammad. Then each Imam in turn infallibly declared his successor. Each Imam is "the Proof of God," the guardian of the correct meaning of the Qur'an and Sunna. They draw from the Light of Muhammad, so cannot go wrong, nor can they exceed or deviate from the truth that he knew and passed on to them. The Shi'a believe that the earth is never without the presence of an Imam, because otherwise the true meaning of faith would be lost. The Hidden Imam is both the Imam of the Present Age and the Awaited One, Imam al-Mahdi, who will one day return to establish true faith and justice throughout the earth.

Because of the centralised authority of the Imams, the Shi'a claim an additional three hundred years of infallible guidance. It was these Imams who guaranteed the deposit of the Hadith of Muhammad according to the Shi'a collections.

The Shi'a have always been a minority, often living alongside and intermingled with their Sunni brothers and sisters. It is common for Sunni and Shi'a to marry one another and the day-to-day living out of their faith is very similar.

During our own time, the time of the Hidden Imam, the Islamic guidance of the community rests in the hands of a body of Shi'a scholars. Amongst these are the Ayatollahs, who are recognised as the most learned and pious. The most highly respected of these Ayatollahs are acknowledged experts in Shari'a and so ordinary Shi'a Muslims today take the rulings of these select Grand Ayatollahs as authoritative guidance on the way in which they should live their lives.

⁹ Q. 4:69 Whoever obeys God and the Messenger, they are with those whom God has blessed: the Prophets and the Truthful, the Martyrs and the Righteous, and excellent companions are they!

¹⁰ Q. 3:7 He it is who has sent down upon you the Book. In it are definitive verses, they are the foundation of the Book, others are susceptible to various meanings. But those in whose hearts there is deviance pursue the verses that are susceptible to various meanings, seeking discord and seeking to interpret them, but no-one knows their interpretation except God. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say, "We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord". And none will grasp the Message except men of understanding.

Since the 16th Century, with the founding of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1765), Shi'a Islam has been the recognised religion of Iran, and Shi'a are a majority in Iraq and Bahrain. They are also significant minorities in Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India and some Gulf States, as well as in other Arab countries.