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Now we have reached the third question which is: How could the preparation of the Expected Leader be achieved, while we know that he only remained five years with his father, al-Imam al-'Askari – which is a period of childhood not sufficient for the maturity of his personality.

Therefore, under what circumstances has this achievement taken place?

The answer is: That al-Mahdi (peace be upon him) was appointed as a successor to his father, for the leadership of the Muslims, which means that he was an Imam in the fullest intellectual and spiritual sense of the word in a very early age of his noble life.

Moreover, the early Imamate (leadership) is a previous phenomenon in the case of his forefathers (peace be upon them all), for example, al-Imam Muhammad son of 'Ali al-Jawad (peace be upon him). We call it a phenomenon because it has given in the case of al-Mahdi's forefathers (peace be upon them), a perceptible and a practical meaning, which the Muslims have lived and been aware of, in all their experiences with the Imams, in one way or another. Therefore, we cannot claim the proof of a clearer and wider phenomenon than the experience of a whole community. So, we can clarify the issue in the following points:

1) The leadership of the Imams of *Ahlul Bayt* (descendants of the Prophet) has never been one of the centres of influence and power that are transmitted through inheritance, from father to son, with the full support of the ruling regime, as was the case, in the leadership of Fatimid caliphs and the 'Abbasids; but it has always won the good will of its wider popular bases, on the grounds of their intellectual and spiritual conviction about the worth of the Imamate for the leadership of Islam.

2) These popular bases have existed since the dawn of Islam and became wider during the times of the two Imams, al-Baqir and as-Sadiq (peace be upon them). The school that these two Imams led within the boundaries of these bases formed a very wide trend that stretched all over the world of Islam,

bringing together hundreds of jurists (*fuqaha'*) theologians (*mutakallimun*) and commentators (*mufasssirun*) on the Qur'an and the learned in the different branches of Islamic and human sciences that were predominant in those times, to the extent that al-Hasan son of 'Ali al-Washsha said, "I went into al-Kufah Mosque and found nine hundred sheikhs all of them were saying, 'Ja'far son of Muhammad related to us . . .'"

3) This school and what it represented of popular bases from Islamic society, had certain conditions which it believed in and abode by, in the appointment of the Imam and his suitability for the role because it believed that an individual cannot be appointed as Imam unless he is the most learned among the agnostic of his time.

4) That both this school and its popular bases were ready to give sacrifices, for the sake of their belief in the Imamate, since the latter was considered, in the opinion of the concomitant leadership, as a hostile line, even from an intellectual point of view. This was the reason that led the authorities to carry out several campaigns of purging and torture to the extent that many people were either killed or were put into prisons, while hundreds of them died in the darkness of the cells. This meant that those who believed in the Imamate were ready to pay a lot, and the only instigation they had was their nearness to Allah.

5) The Imams these bases yielded to were not isolated from them, only when the authorities prosecuted them or sent them into exile. This is what we come to know through the narrators who related to us the events of each one among the twelve Imams, and on the one hand from what has been copied from the letters that they sent to their contemporaries and the trips that they took, and on the other hand from representatives that they dispatched to the different corners of the Islamic world, as well as the frequent visits that the Shi' ahs used to pay to their Imams in the holy city of Medina, when they went to the sacred lands for the performance of the holy rites of hajj.

All of these factors show an uninterrupted interaction between the Imam and his popular bases, that stretched over the different parts of the world of Islam, with all their different classes including the learned as well as the others.

6) That the caliphate which was contemporary with the Imams (peace be upon them) used to consider their spiritual leadership as a great threat against its existence and its destiny. Because of that it deployed all of its efforts for the sake of disintegrating that leadership and bore a lot of negativism in that respect, sometimes appearing under the guise of cruelty and transgression when its security was at stake. The campaigns of persecution and victimization were a permanent event with respect to the Imam, in spite of what that left behind of sadness and disgust among the Muslims and their supporters from the different classes of society.

If we take these six points into consideration knowing that they are all historical facts, it leaves no room for doubt, and we come out with the following result: That the phenomenon of the early Imamate was a

fact and not an illusion. Because the Imam who emerges while still young and declares openly that he is the spiritual and the intellectual leader of the Muslim community as a whole, and whom that wide trend pledges its loyalty, must surely be in possession of a remarkable, let alone a very wide knowledge and gnosis and a very wide horizon as well as a proficiency in jurisdiction, exegesis and the articles of faith, otherwise the popular bases would not be convinced of his spiritual leadership. We should also bear in mind the fact that the Imams took certain positions that made the interaction with their bases possible and threw different lights on their way of life and personality.

Do you think then that a young child who declares his Imamate (spiritual leadership) and hoists out of it a flag for Islam, with the full knowledge of the masses among his popular bases who believe in him and are prepared to sacrifice their lives and security without taking the trouble to discover his condition, or without being incited by the phenomenon of the early Imamate to inquire about the validity of the situation and the establishment of the worth of this young Imam?

Now supposing that people did not attempt to assess the situation, would it then be possible that after days, months or even years, the whole affair would go unnoticed without its truth coming to the surface, although there has been a natural and constant interaction between the young Imam and the rest of the people? Is it rational that the worth of a young child's way of thinking and knowledge would not be obvious after this long interaction?

Therefore, if we assume that the popular bases of the Imams of *Ahlul Bayt* (descendants of the Prophet) were not able to discover the truth of the matter, why did the existing caliphate keep silent and did not attempt to find out, if it were for its benefit?

Nothing could have been easier for the authorities than if the Imam had been a child, quite immature in his education and way of thinking, the normal case in all children.

No plan would have been more successful than to present this child to his supporters (the Shi'ah) and others and prove to them that he was not fit for the Imamate and the intellectual and spiritual leadership.

If it is indeed difficult to convince people of a man in his forties or fifties, already in possession of a great deal of education for the role of the Imamate, there can be no difficulty in convincing them of the incapacity of an ordinary child for the same role, in the sense that the Shi'ah know, regardless of his intelligence and awareness.

All this would have been possible and easier than the complicated means of suppression and recklessness which the authorities resorted to in these times.

The only explanation for the caliphate's hesitation in playing this card, is that it realized that the early Imamate was a real phenomenon and not an invented idea. The truth is that it had realized the fact after it had attempted to play that card but failed. History relates to us many of these attempts and their failure, while it does not mention at all the occurrence of a situation in which the phenomenon of early

Imamate was put into question, where the Imam was confronted with difficulties or complications which surpassed his ability or shook people's trust in him.

This is what we mean when we said earlier that the early Imamate is a real phenomenon in the life of *Ahlul Bayt* (descendants of the Prophet), moreover this phenomenon has similar roots and situations in the Divine heritage that stretched over all the messages and the Divine leadership. It is enough to cite one example of an early leadership of *Ahlul Bayt* (peace be upon them) in the case of Yahya (peace be upon him) when Allah said:

يَا يَحْيَىٰ خُذِ الْكِتَابَ بِقُوَّةٍ ۗ وَآتَيْنَاهُ الْحُكْمَ صَبِيًّا

"O Yahya take the Book with strength, and We have given him wisdom when he was young.
(Qur'an, 19: 12)

Now that the early leadership has been proved as an existing and real phenomenon in *Ahlul Bayt's* life there is no more objection to the leadership of al- Imam al-Mahdi (peace be upon him) nor to his succession to his father while very young.

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