

Lesson 15: Amir Al-Mu'minin 'Ali: The Chosen Successor of the Prophet

1. The Successor of the Prophet

The Shi'a Ithn 'Ashari Muslims believe that after the Prophet of Islam, the leadership of the world of Islam fell to Amir al-Mu'minin, 'Ali (a.s.), and then to his eleven infallible descendants. This belief is as clear as the rays of the morning sun, and those who are unprejudiced and impartial will have no cause to doubt it.

Jabir bin 'Abdullah, one of the prominent companions of the Prophet (a.s.), said, "The day the verse concerning obedience to Allah, the Prophet and the Ulu 'l-Amr was revealed (4:59), I asked the Prophet: 'We know Allah and the Prophet, but who is the third?' He said, 'They are the Imams, my successors, the first of whom is 'Ali bin Abi Talib, then, in order, Hasan, Husayn, 'Ali ibn Husayn, Muhammad bin 'Ali, who was called Baqir in the Torah, and whom you, Jabir, will meet and to whom you will convey my salam; then, after him, Ja'far ibn Muhammad as-Sadiq, Musa ibn Ja'far, 'Ali ibn Musa, Muhammad ibn 'Ali, 'Ali bin Muhammad, Hasan ibn 'Ali, and in the end the son of Hasan ibn 'Ali will come, whose name will be the same as mine (Muhammad Abu 'l-Qasim).'"¹

2. The First Leader

No society, at any time or place, can stand free and liberated without a leader. We also know that if a ruler is dedicated to the wellbeing of the society, then he must strive to protect it and he must also take into consideration the present as well as the future of that society.

It is because of this necessity that rulers, even during short journeys, appoint a deputy. This is evident in every case of leadership. A head of the family, a principal or headmaster of the school, a foreman in a factory, all put a deputy in their place for the absence of even a few hours. This matter is so obvious that it needs no proof.

The great Prophet of Islam, who was the leader of the Islamic world, observed this very principle. Wherever the light of Islam shone for the first time, he always appointed an administrator for that place to look after its affairs. When he sent armies for jihad, he appointed a commander, and sometimes appointed several persons as deputy commanders so that if one was killed, the army would not be left without a commander. Thus we know of persons whom the Prophet appointed as his deputies and representatives whenever he traveled from Medina, so that Medina should not be without a leader during his absence.

The Shi'as ask how, with this evidence, it is consistent with the wisdom of the Prophet that he should die without appointing a successor. Which of the following possibilities seems reasonable:

Was the Islamic society, after the death of the Prophet, not in need of a leader again?

Or did the Prophet of Islam attach no importance to the Muslim community after he had gone?

Or were concerns and prudence something he could do nothing about?

Or did he not know who was the worthiest successor?

Which of these possibilities seems more reasonable?

With the quality of leadership and the concern for the affairs of the people which we see in the Prophet of Islam, how could he have not given any guidance or instruction on this vital matter of the Muslims' leadership?

In the light of this reality, the Shi'as proceeded to investigate the original texts and documents of Islam and they came across an enormous quantity of sources which made them conclude that there are clear, sufficient, precise orders from the Prophet of Islam about his successor: the verse of wilayah, the hadith of Ghadir, the hadith of Safinah, the hadith of Thaqaalayn, and many more, all of which are tested, examined and explained in the great works done on this subject.

From all these we shall select only the hadith of Ghadir and we shall seek to judge its value and implications in an unprejudiced manner.

3. The Historical Hadith of Ghadir

In the tenth year of the Islamic calendar (hijrah), the Prophet set out for Mecca to perform the pilgrimage (hajj). This hajj was undertaken in the last years of the Prophet's life, and for this reason history has given it the name of the "Farewell Pilgrimage" (*hajjatu l-wida'*). Muslims participated in extraordinarily large numbers in this journey of the Prophet to Mecca with the eagerness to learn and do the pilgrimage from the Prophet directly. They numbered about 120,000. Some groups joined him in the town of Mecca.

After completing the hajj, when the Prophet was returning to Medina, the following verse was revealed on the 18th day of Dhil Hijja at Ghadir Khumm:

O Messenger, deliver that [message] which has been sent down to you from your Lord; for if you

do not, then [it be as if] you have not delivered His message [at all]. Allah will protect you from men. (5:67)

Thus a great message reached the Prophet from Allah. The edges of the caravan were slowly rolling along. Suddenly a herald proclaimed on behalf of the Prophet: "Allah has given a command...Let everyone await the command..."

Thereupon, the Prophet (a.s.) gave the order that everyone should stop moving and come to a halt; and they did. Many travelers stood there on the order of the Prophet to hear the news. We have been told that the desert of Ghadr Khumm is plain without water; it was midday and the heat of the sun was scorching. What is the news for which the Prophet is keeping the people standing in such a place, at such a time?

Then the sound of adhān was heard. The Prophet performs the prayer with the people, and then camel saddle-packs are built up to form a raised platform. The Prophet stands on the top of them. People catch their breath, and are as quiet as the sands of the desert. They are waiting for the news.

The Prophet starts. After praising Allah, the Prophet says, "Do you agree that I have fulfilled my responsibility by conveying the message of Allah to you?"

"We are the witnesses that you have delivered the message to us, and that you made every effort in this direction. May Allah give you the best reward!"

"Do you witness to the unity of God, the prophethood of his slave, Muhammad, and to heaven and hell, death and the resurrection, and to the life after death?"

"We do witness to these."

"May Allah be our witness!" And then he said, "O people; I and you, we shall see one another besides [the fountain of] Kawthar [on the day of judgment]. Be careful after me how you deal with two precious things."

"O Prophet, what are these two things?"

"The Book of Allah, and my descendants. Allah told me that these two are not be separated from one another till they reach me beside the Kawthar. Do not go ahead of them, for you will be ruined. Do not fall behind them, for you will also be ruined."

Then he raised the hand of 'Ali so that everyone could see him and know him. Then, in the same position, he read the divine order of succession.

"O people, who is more deserving among the believers to have wilāyah (authority) and guardianship over them?"

"Allah and the Prophet know best."

"Allah gave me wilayah, and I am more worthy than the believers and the followers themselves. Therefore, to whosoever I am his wali (master) and guardian, 'Ali is his master and guardian too. O Allah, be the friend of his friends, and the enemy of his enemies. Help anyone who helps him, and punish anyone who rebels against him."

"Now everyone who is present must tell [the event to] those who are absent."

The people had not yet dispersed when the following verse was revealed:

Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed my blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam as your religion. (5:3)

Then the Prophet cried out: "Allahu Akbar! The religion of Allah has been perfected, and He is pleased with my prophethood and the wilayah of 'Ali after me."

After this ceremony, people felicitated Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali. Among the foremost of the companions who felicitated him were Abu Bakr and 'Umar who said, "How good for you, O 'Ali, to have become the master of me and every believing man and woman."

(A) The Authenticity of the Hadith of Ghadir

From the point of view of its chain of narration, the hadith of Ghadir is so strong that it is probably unique.

One hundred and ten of the companions (*sahabah*) of the Prophet who were present at Ghadir have narrated it from the Prophet without any intermediary, and also eighty four of the disciples of the companions (*tabi'in*). The unbiased scholars of the Sunni world have mentioned the event of Ghadir in their books with great documentation. 'Allamah Amini has mentioned three hundred and fifty such scholars in his al-Ghadir. Many great Islamic scholars have written books exclusively on the event of Ghadir, and twenty-six such writers have been mentioned in al-Ghadir. Dictionary compilers have related the story of Ghadir under the entry of 'Ghadir' or 'Mawla' (master).

So there can not be the smallest doubt, nor the least shadow over the chain of narration of the hadith of Ghadir except for those handful of people who can stand in the light of the sun and feel its warmth on their skin but still say that there is no light or warmth.

(B) The Meaning of "Mawla" in the Hadith of Ghadir

The hadith of Ghadir is so striking that everybody must in all fairness notice and then become certain that 'Ali became the first successor of the Prophet. So let us look at the crucial word and context of the hadith.

Mawla, in this hadīth, means someone who has the status of wilāyah and imamate, and can give his opinion and command on it; his command has priority over all other commands. For this reason, before he said, "He whose master (*mawla*) I am," the Prophet asked, "O People, who among the believers has more authority (*awla*)?"

Awla, or having more authority, means that the Prophet's wish comes before the wish of the people, and that whatever he says or does is an authority for the people. People follow him; he has wilāyah and guardianship over them. Now, we can see that just as in the first sentence, the authority and wilāyah of the Prophet is mentioned, so in the following sentence the word 'mawla' for 'Ali must have the same meaning so that there can be some connection between the two sentences.

Therefore the correct meaning which we get from these few sentences is as the Prophet asked: "Do not I have more authority over you?" "Yes!" everyone replied. "So, whosoever among you on whom I have authority, 'Ali also has authority. After me, he will be the mawla of all Muslims and my successor."

Thus, in this hadīth, there is no question of any other meaning for 'mawla' apart from having authority or priority -- wilāyah and imamate; and any other meaning in its place is entirely irrelevant. We should also note that the Prophet of Islam kept people standing in this great heat. This historical fact makes it clear that the matter has a special importance; for, if not, no reasonable man would suppose that the Prophet would detain people under such conditions when his purpose was only to remind them of a trivial matter, for example, that 'Ali was his friend!

* * *

This lesson has been adapted and abridged from Dar Rah-e Haqq, *The Roots of Religion*, Qum, Iran.

Question Paper on Lesson 15

Question 1: [8 points]

True or False:

- (a) The Prophet predicted that Jubayr bin 'Abdullah will meet Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.).
- (b) The Prophet of Islam considered his ummah capable of selecting a successor after his death.
- (c) When the Prophet sent armies for jihad, he used to appoint a commander & several deputy commanders.
- (d) Imam Muhammad ibn 'Ali's name is mentioned in the original Torah as "al-Baqir".
- (e) The event of Ghadir took place in 11th year of hijrah.
- (f) The word "awla" in the hadīth of Ghadir means "one who has more authority".

(g) “Tab‘ayn” means the companions of the Prophet.

(h) `Allamah Amini has mentioned 350 Sunni scholars who have described the event of Ghaḍir.

Question 2: [15 points]

Name at least three authentic aḥdīth of the Prophet of Islam which clearly and undeniably settle the question of succession after his death.

Question 3: [6 points]

Circle the letter of the correct answer:

In the Qur‘ānic verse concerning the obedience to Allah, the Prophet, and the Ulu ‘l-amr, the term “ulu ‘l-amr” refers to:

- (a) the pious people of the community.
- (b) the rulers of the time.
- (c) the 12 Imams of the Ahlu ‘l-bayt.
- (d) the people of authority.
- (e) the people of prominence and great wealth.

Question 4: [6 points]

Describe the most crucial part of the hadīth of Ghaḍir exactly in the Prophet's words.

Question 5: [15 points]

Fill in the blanks:

- (a) The hadīth of Ghaḍir is narrated by _____ companions of the Prophet who witnessed the event personally.
- (b) _____ of the disciples of the companions have mentioned the hadīth of Ghaḍir.
- (c) _____ Sunni scholars have described the event of Ghaḍir.
- (d) _____ great scholars have written books exclusively on the subject of Ghaḍir.
- (e) `Allamah Amini has written a book on Ghaḍir called _____.

1. Lutfullah as-Safi, Muntakhabu ‘l-Athar, p. 101. Safi quotes 50 similar hadith from Sunni and Shi‘a sources.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/islam-faith-practice-history-sayyid-muhammad-rizvi/lesson-15-amir-al-muminin-ali-chosen-successor>