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Historical Factors and Shi'ism

Question:

Have historical factors influenced the development of Shiaism, or is this sect a set of beliefs derived from the Qur'an and the clear traditions of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family)?

Answer:

We need to explain several points in order to shed light on the topic and show that:

(a) historical factors and events had no role in the development of Shiaism and the belief in the existence of an Imam who will save humanity

(b) all beliefs of the Shi'a are entirely Islamic and are derived from the same sources that the remainder of Muslim beliefs, from the Unity of Allah to the Day of Judgement, are derived from.

A. The Origin of Shiaism In the Prophet's Time

In accordance with firm historical evidence and abundant traditions, the origin and formation of Shiaism was during the time of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family). It began in the very first years of the prophetic mission and was completed by conveying *Hadith al-Thaqalain* and officially and publicly proclaiming it during the event of *Ghadir Khumm*.

Of course, during his final illness, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) wished to put that hadith in written form, and strong historical evidence and narrations indicate that 'Umar's obstruction and the disrespect shown to the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) prevented him from having it written.

The principles of Shi'a belief have been referred to in various places in the Holy Prophet's (peace be

upon him and his family) words of guidance. By way of example, the issue of the leadership of the Muslim community (*‘ummah*), brought up many times at suitable occasions, can be found among the sayings of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family). The importance of the issue of *Imamah* (leadership of the *‘ummah*) has been emphasized in his sayings to an extent that in one of his well-known and in fact *mutawatir* (consecutively-narrated) traditions he says:

مَنْ مَاتَ وَلَمْ يَعْرِفْ إِمَامَ زَمَانِهِ مَاتَ مِيتَةَ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ.

“One who dies without recognizing the Imam of his time dies the death of the Days of Ignorance (before the advent of Islam).”¹

Death while ignorant of the Imam has been regarded as equal to dying during the Age of Ignorance – or rather they have been considered the same thing. According to consecutively narrated traditions, the conditions of the Imam, which tribe he is from, and the fact that the number of Imams (peace be upon them) is twelve all have been explained by the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family).

Similarly, the qualities of the Imam’s knowledge, his spiritual characteristics, and that he must be the most knowledgeable and perfect of all human beings have been explained in the Qur’an and traditions, as has the fact that the successorship of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) and *Imamate* of the *ummah* after him is a Divine post that, just like prophethood itself, is appointed by Allah.

Shi’a thought was established in the very first years of the advent of Islam on the basis of the original sources of Islam. However, at that time the opposing school of thought – which some time later came to be known as Sunni thought – did not exist and the Muslims were not divided into two branches. This is because those who, after the Prophet’s (peace be upon him and his family) death, propagated the opposing view – which caused a division in the Muslim ranks – were unable to openly position themselves against the pure Islam, which later came to be known as Shi’a Islam.

This division officially became apparent after the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) when a group gathered in *Saqifah* and chose a successor for the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family).

We must add that according to the guidance provided in the Holy Qur’an, in Islam, a reliable source and authority for explaining, organizing, and legislating beliefs has been foreseen and in numerous verses has been clearly stated, such as in Surah Nisa:

وَلَوْ رَدُّوهُ إِلَى الرَّسُولِ وَإِلَى أُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْهُمْ لَعَلِمَهُ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَنْبِطُونَهُ مِنْهُمْ.

“Although, were they to refer that to the Messenger (peace be upon him and his family) and those in authority among them, those among them who understand the roots of the issues would know it.”²

From this verse, it is understood that leadership is exclusive to the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) and the *ulu ‘l-amr*, who are the infallible Imams.

According to *mutawatir* traditions, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) has clearly introduced this virtuous authority, which is none other than the progeny and Imams from the Ahl al-Bait of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family). He has said, “They are with the Qur’an and the Qur’an is with them, and they and the Qur’an shall never separate from each other.”

In fact, in one hadith, he has added:

فَإِنَّ فِيْنَا أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ فِي كُلِّ خَلْفٍ عُدُوًّا يَنْفُونَ عَنْهُ تَحْرِيفَ الْعَالِينَ وَأَنْتِهَالَ
الْمُبْطِلِينَ.

*“Among us, the Ahl al-Bait, in every generation there are found people firm in religion who protect the religion from the tampering of extremists and the mischief of the astray.”*³

B. The Origin of the Issue of Khilafah

From the first days of the prophetic mission (*bi`thah*) the issue of leadership of the Islamic Nation after the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) was more or less in people’s minds. The story of the man who made his acceptance of Islam conditional upon becoming the leader after the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family), which the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) did not accept, is well known.

The Shi’a viewpoint about successorship of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) is a point that was announced by divine command before the people during the time of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) by the Prophet himself. At that time, none opposed it; rather, all the people – even those who later were involved in the events at Saqifah – celebrated it, and while pledging allegiance congratulated the Imam (peace be upon him). But from that very instant they began covertly planning and plotting and reached a point where they wished to assassinate the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family)!

After the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family), the issue became a crisis and the opponents, with unusual severity and hard-heartedness, acted in the name of expediency and by threats and plotting created such an atmosphere that in the end they opposed the arrangements the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) had announced, to the extent that they insulted and transgressed the

personality of Fatimah az-Zahra (peace be upon her) and distanced the course of Muslim history from the path the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) had specified.

With the limitless cruelty they showed, they even trampled the dignity of the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) only offspring.

Of course, because of the policy 'Ali (peace be upon him) pursued, two schools – Shi'a and Sunni – did not come into open and violent confrontation. The issue only remained in the minds of those who thought about the legitimacy of the government; others, either indifferent to the matter or associated with the ruling party, did not discuss it. They may very well have considered it settled.

However, people like 'Umar ibn al-Khattab were aware that in the face of the arrangements announced by the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) the legitimacy of their actions would always be under question. Thus, they prevented the return of the people to that authentic Islamic thinking by using political devices, and this is the reason that for about a century and a half they forbade traditions from the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family). And since 'Umar knew that if he did not find a way to sideline 'Ali (peace be upon him) after him 'Ali (peace be upon him) would definitely assume leadership, he plotted a new strategy.

He knew that if the testament – about which it is not known whether it is authentic or whether 'Uthman added it to the document – was not attributed to Abu Bakr, Shi'a thinking would again rise after 'Umar's death and their plotting would be fruitless.

He thus devised a six-member council and specified its mandate in such a way as to eliminate Amir al-Mu'minin (peace be upon him).

In spite of this, the program specified by the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) was revived in memories and finally, in the end of 'Uthman's period, his oppression aroused general anger and disgust towards him and stirred the Muslims to rise against him. In this way the issue of successorship of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) was again raised and many companions returned to the Prophet's original dictate and declared 'Ali (peace be upon him) the rightful successor of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) and regarded jihad under him (peace be upon him) the highest form of worship.

Thus, the Shi'a belief about the succession to the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) was never forgotten and people's hearts were never without attachment to the Ahl al-Bait and awareness that they had been oppressed and their right usurped. People's statements and the odes of poets such as al-Farazdaq show that the Shi'a point of view existed and even an individual like Musa ibn Nasir – the ruler of Africa whose slave, Tariq, conquered Spain – in spite of being one of the officials of Banu Umayya's government, was a proponent of Shi'a thought. For this very reason, in spite of all of his services, in the end his property was confiscated and he was removed from office.

In fact, events came to such a pass that this point of view even penetrated the family of Mu'awiya and Yazid, and Yazid's son officially condemned his grandfather and father and acknowledged the right of 'Ali and the Ahl al-Bait (peace be upon them). The situation was the same in the time of Banu 'Abbas as well.

From the government's point of view the rightfulness and genuineness of Shi'a thought should not have been put forth and followers of this school should not have had official responsibilities. But the situation was such that the oppressive and usurping rulers of Banu 'Abbas such as Mansur, Harun, and Ma'mun, were aware of the truth of this Shi'a thought, even though in practice they crushed it.

As a result of the spread of Shi'a thought, Muntasir and some other rulers from Banu 'Abbas became favorably disposed to this view in the issue of succession to the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family). It has been said that Nasir, in whose time the cellar of occultation in Samarra was inspected, declared himself Shi'a, and it has been narrated that he regarded himself the deputy of the twelfth Imam (peace be upon him).

From the sum of the above facts it becomes clear that the true Islam, which is the same Shi'a thought and Islam that existed in the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family), has been there over the last fourteen centuries and history played no role in its existence. Rather, the existence of this point of view played a part in the coming about of major movements, risings, and events. Contrary to what some simple and misinformed people think, it must be said that Shi'a governments in Egypt, Africa, and the Dayalima in Iran and Iraq, and finally the rise of the Safawiyya were all events brought about by Shi'a thought; they played no role in bringing it about.

C. Sunnism and its Sectarian Meaning (in opposition to Shiaism)

After the Prophet's Time

The analysis that Shiaism, like Sunnism, had from the beginning a political form and gradually developed a religious basis is incorrect. Opposition to the successor announced by the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) had a political aspect and that same political behavior caused division and conflict and brought into existence a new opinion in opposition to belief in *Imamah*. It resulted in the followers of pure Islam, in the form of a faction and with the name Shi'a, developing a political orientation.

But the policy the Shi'a as a political group pursued after this affair was based on the true teachings of Islam. Before it acquired a political tint, it was a principle pertaining to belief and religion, and it was a creed that included politics.

Thus, politicians would oppose this creed and strove to introduce a new sect and school of thought in opposition to it. In this way, at great expense and by bribing, threatening, and terrorizing, they in later periods gave a religious form to the policies that made the *khilafah* (succession) deviate from its specified course.

Of course, this movement wanted only to acquire the government, and if they hadn't seen this aspect in Shiaism, they would not have opposed it and would not have introduced a sect by the name of Sunnism in opposition to it.

Thus, politics was the motive for opposition to Shiaism and the command announced by the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family). In the beginning, when the leaders of this party started their activities in those confused times, they hadn't yet put forward a clear way of thinking.

Many factors, primary among which was the threat of the destruction of Islam through internal armed strife, prevented the religio-political leaders from reaching for their swords, and this aided the leaders of the anti-Shi'a school in taking hold of affairs.

Since they had no firm thinking for them to follow in practice and in no case respected the principle of *bay'ah* (allegiance) and election by the people, the basis of their government was coercion and tyranny.

After the event of Saqifah which was the reason for Abu Bakr's assumption of power, 'Umar, with the peculiar coarseness and roughness that he possessed, drew his sword and roamed the streets, forcing the people to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr. This coercion came to such a pass that they even demanded allegiance of 'Ali (peace be upon him) and forcibly took him to the masjid to obtain his allegiance, after unspeakable insolence to Lady Fatima (peace be upon her) and desecrating the sanctity of her house.

The government of 'Umar himself, which he claimed was formed in accordance to Abu Bakr's testament, was such that they said that when Abu Bakr was on his deathbed and was in an out of consciousness, he endeavored to write a testament. In that situation, without him specifying the ruler after him, 'Uthman wrote 'Umar's name in the testament. When Abu Bakr returned to consciousness, he affirmed it!

Whatever it was, was there even a testament in place? In any case, 'Umar came to power and no one so much as said to Abu Bakr, "*Pain has overcome him*"⁴; no regard is given to what this ailing man, who has lost his reason, says. Yet with this very excuse they prevented the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) from writing a testament!

Be that as it may, with Abu Bakr's appointment 'Umar took control of power and himself appointed a six-member council for after his death.

Thus, we come to know that there was no harmonious idea based on the people's right to election involved in the affair. However, when 'Uthman was killed, the Muslims rushed to 'Ali's (peace be upon him) door – and though, according to the Shi'a, he alone was the rightful ruler – all pledged allegiance to him. Afterwards, though the opponents of the Shi'a strove to find a religious basis for government and put forward the idea of general allegiance or that of the upper class and other contradictory ideas – even force and overpowering – as such a basis, in reality the standard was nothing but coercion. They acted in such a way that the people had no choice but pledging allegiance to the successor appointed by the

ruler.

Thus, the Shi'a's opponents had no overall program of government, and even in current times one of their biggest researchers, who has realized this fact, says:

“In fact, Islam has not foreseen a particular method in the politics of selecting a ruler; any form the people themselves specify becomes the law and is implemented.”

D. Cause of the Division of Muslims into two factions, Sunni and Shi'a

The fact is that the real reason for this split was the love of status and power.

A few saw that with the situation that had taken shape, they would have no part in the future leadership; thus from the very time of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) they began grouping and conspiring. One of their major plans was to introduce and then propagate a new school of thought in opposition to the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) stance.

They raised the slogan "حَسْبُنَا كِتَابُ اللَّهِ" (The Book of Allah suffices us) to reduce the value of the existing traditions about *Imamah*, and in the end they introduced these traditions as worthless. For this very reason when the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) wished to write his testament, since they knew this written testament would reinforce his oral testaments, they put up firm resistance. In words also related by Ahl al-Sunnah, 'Umar said,

غَلَبَ عَلَيْهِ الْوَجَعُ. حَسْبُنَا كِتَابُ اللَّهِ.

*"Illness has overcome him; the book of Allah suffices us."*⁵

According to the narration of others, he said,

"إِنَّ الرَّجُلَ لَيَهْجُرُ."

*"The man (The Prophet) speaks nonsense!"*⁶ (God forbid!)

In either case, he stood in the way and said, "The book of Allah suffices us," meaning that we have no need of the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) testament and his explicit statements.

The title Shi'a was given to the followers of 'Ali (peace be upon him) in that period by the Prophet himself

(peace be upon him and his family). The Prophet called his sincere followers the Shi'a. But this did not result in the division of the Muslims into two groups. Though people like Salman, Abu Dharr, and Miqdad had a firm belief in 'Ali (peace be upon him) from that time, the opponents were not yet an independent group, and these admonitions of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) about *Imamah* meant that all should follow Imam 'Ali (peace be upon him).

But after the death of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family), opposition to this command came out in the open and the love of power and ruling over others – which some had set their sights on – caused some, in spite of the Prophet's explicit statements about 'Ali's successorship, to oppose that and cause division in the ranks of the Muslims.

If we wish to hide the facts and present a different explanation, even if untrue, we have to say that this division started when because of their weak faith a group of Muslims did not give the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) words and counsel the same status as revelation and assumed the book of Allah is sufficient for people's guidance and there is no need for the Prophet's words. It is as if they regarded themselves as the Prophet's equals in grasping the Qur'an's principles and purposes.

Thus, they did not follow the path he (peace be upon him and his family) had specified and favored their personal opinion and the benefit and harm they themselves perceived for themselves over the Prophet's commands. Or else they considered some of the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) commands as being related to government and administration of society, but considered them modifiable as conditions required.

They presumed the successorship was just such an issue and believed that even if the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) had appointed his own successor, since his words and actions – in their view – did not have the status of revelation, opposition to them is permissible. Thus after the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) death these people ignored the Prophet's command and set it aside and with these false excuses removed the successorship from its specified course.

Even though they had no proper system of thought for the administration of society in those conditions on which they could base the *khilafah*, still they insisted that the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) appointee shouldn't take charge of the administration of society, or it isn't expedient. In spite of the fact that in some issues they insisted on implementing the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) command, here their conduct was the opposite, just as, when the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) appointed 'Usamah as the leader of the army, they did not leave him in his post. In any case, they thought it was their right to adjust the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) commands, carry out any changes or alterations they thought necessary and make use of pretexts that are worse than the crime itself.

In opposition to this group it was Imam 'Ali (peace be upon him) and a small group of his followers who believed in the truth of the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) teachings and commands and

would say that the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) words have the ruling of revelation, or rather that they are in fact revelation, as the Qur'an says in this regard:

وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ إِن هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ.

“He speaks not of his own desire; it is naught but revelation that is revealed.”⁷

And the verse:

وَمَا آتَاكُمُ الرَّسُولُ فَخُذُوهُ وَمَا نَهَاكُمْ عَنْهُ فَانْتَهُوا.

“What the Messenger has brought you, take, and what he forbids you from, avoid.”⁸

refers to the commands of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family), which must be implemented without alteration, and we are in no way free of need of the Prophet's counsels and teachings. The religion of Islam is perfect and comprehensive from all aspects and no defect can be imagined in it.

This group was called *Ahl al-Nass* (followers of the religious texts). They would say that the path of re-interpreting and contextualizing these traditions is closed and the succession of Imam 'Ali (peace be upon him) was conveyed at Allah's command to the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) by revelation.

يَا أَيُّهَا الرَّسُولُ بَلِّغْ مَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ مِنْ رَبِّكَ...

“O' Messenger! Convey that which has been revealed to thee by thy Lord...”⁹

In any case, the Muslims were in this way split into two camps. In truth, using the term “Ahl al-Sunnat” (followers of the sunnat) to refer to those who rejected, altered, and falsely interpreted the sunnat is incorrect. Instead, those deserving this title are the ones who remained attached to the Qur'an and Prophetic *sunnat* (conduct).

Incidentally, intent of those who by clinging to “The book of Allah suffices us” split the Muslims into two camps is that the basic matter of the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) messengership is the book of Allah and there is no need of the Prophetic sunnat. Even though this group, with there way of thinking, opposed the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his family) explicit command regarding Imam 'Ali (peace be upon him), after they had sidelined 'Ali (peace be upon him) they returned to the Prophet's

sunnat in many instances, since they saw that their fallacious way of thinking could not go forward. By raising the slogan “*The book of Allah suffices us*” it is not possible to obtain needed rulings and solve society’s difficulties.

Of course, the opponents of the Shi’a thought benefited substantially from such slogans and deceived a large group, most of whom were commoners and unaware, and they prevented the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) from writing his testament. With this excuse they marginalized those who said the Prophet’s (peace be upon him and his family) command regarding the successorship of ‘Ali (peace be upon him) must be respected and made it their principle that only the Qur’an is central. Their aim was that the traditions of Ghadir, *yawn al-dar*, and other ahadith not be mentioned. Later, when they saw that without the traditions it is not possible to manage the affairs they became involved in *ijtihad* (juristic reasoning) in opposition to *ahadith* (the exercise of personal opinion) and altered the commandments of Allah and turned to false interpretations, explanations, and analogy, and they subjected many traditions to doubt.

The origin of the Shi’a school, like the origin of Islam itself, is not related to historical events. Of course, events had and have an effect on people’s political positions and the occurrence of certain happenings, but is not the primary factor on all matters. For example, one of the causes and wisdoms in the concealment of the twelfth Imam (peace be upon him) – as indicated by some traditions – was that he (peace be upon him) not be caught up in allegiance to oppressive rulers. However, his existence (peace be upon him) and concealment, according to consecutively narrated (*mutawatir*) traditions, was a destined affair determined in advance and which occurred according to that plan. It is not that the issue of *Imamah* came about gradually through time and the course of history has made it necessary.

Through historical research it becomes clear that it is the Sunni school of thought about the succession that came about as a result of a chain of historical causes; otherwise Shi’a thought about the principle of *Imamah*, as explained several times, was founded at the beginning of the Prophetic mission (*bi`thah*) as a result of Allah’s command and the Prophet’s (peace be upon him and his family) clear instructions.

Thus, it was Shi’a thought that influenced history, not history that created it.

Opponents of the Shi’a school of thought say that there was no guidance from the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) in this regard. Thus, after the Prophet’s (peace be upon him and his family) demise, the concern and confusion that had taken hold of the Muslims caused them to specify someone as *khalifah*. This was accomplished in Saqifah after much discussion and searching that resulted in Abu Bakr being chosen as the Prophet’s successor. Subsequently, in order to avoid unpleasant events and chaos in society, Abu Bakr appointed his successor and ‘Umar in turn specified a six-member council for after his death to make a decision in this regard.

All of these occurrences had particular reasons at the head of which was political goals. Though the supporters of this point of view try to portray this important historical happening as natural, facts are at

odds with its being natural. On the other hand, in numerous ways they support the Shi'a point of view about *Imamah*.

E. The Religious Basis for Support of the Leadership of Ahl al-Bait (peace be upon them)

Support for the leadership of Ahl al-Bait (peace be upon them) from the beginning was based on Islamic teachings. Those who opposed Saqifah and the succession of Abu Bakr had no motive except their religious duty and guarding the teachings and guidance of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family).

Referring to books like *The Origin of the Shi'a and their Principles*, *History of the Shi'a*, *The Shi'a in History*, and tens of other Shi'a and Sunni books will at least demonstrate that inclination to Shiaism from the beginning has had only a religious motive.

The sermons of Amir al-Mu'minin (peace be upon him) in *Nahj al-Balagha* affirm that the true position of the Ahl al-Bait (peace be upon them) has truly been material, spiritual, and religious leadership, of which governing is a branch.

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1. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 8, p. 368, in the course of Allamah Majlisi's commentary
 2. Surah an-Nisa' (4), Verse 83
 3. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 2, p. 92, footnote 21
 4. Commentary on Nahj al-Balaghah, Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid, vol. 2, p. 55
 5. Commentary on Nahj al-Balaghah, Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid, vol. 2, p. 55
 6. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 30 p. 535
 7. Surah Najm (53), Verses 3-4
 8. Surah Hashr (59), Verse 7
 9. Surah Ma'idah (5), Verse 67

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