

Chapter 37: Imamah from the Viewpoint of the Imams

The general discussion of the question of Imamah is coming to an end with this discourse. A further discussion of this question will consist of the study of the Prophetic traditions relating to Imam Ali and other Imams and the sayings of the early Imams in respect of the subsequent Imams. All these traditions are of the nature of authoritative directive, in regard to the designation and appointment of the Imams.

Perhaps a number of points included in the present discourse have already been covered by the discussion already made, but as these points reflect the spirit of the question of Imamah, we propose to discuss them again with reference to the sayings of the Imams in this connection. We also propose to quote some extracts from al-Kafi, Book of Hujjah.

We have several times said that Imamah in the sense in which the Shi'ah or at least their Imams talk about it is different from the Imamah of which the Sunnis speak. The question of Imamah is also different from that of government, which is so often the subject of discussion nowadays. Basically the question of Imamah closely follows that of Prophethood, not in the sense that Imamah is something inferior to Prophethood, but in the sense that it resembles Prophethood. The great Prophets were both Prophets and Imams at one and the same time. Imamah is a spiritual state. In this connection the Imam

have laid stress on the concept of man. Let us review our concept of him so that this point may become clear.

What Kind of a Being is Man?

Do you know what kind of a being basically man is? There are two points of view. According to one of them man, like all other living beings, is a 100% material being, which as a result of a series of material changes has developed to the utmost possible to which degree a material being could develop. Life whether in plants, animals or men is a manifestation of the gradual development of the matter without the interference of any non-material element in their existence. (We have used the word element only

for want of any better expression.)

Every wonderful quality existing in any being emanates from its material structure. On this basis the first man or the first man who appeared in this world must have been the most primitive men. It is with the passage of time that man has gradually developed.

That is true whether we consider man to have been created direct from clay according to the ancient conception, or to have developed from lower animal kingdom on the basis of natural selection according to the theory put forward by some modern gentlemen whose idea is also worth consideration at least as a theory, according to this theory also man has his ultimate roots in the earth although according to it the first man was not created direct from clay.

First Man in the Qur'an

Not only according to the Islamic and Qur'anic belief, but according to all religions, the first man was not only more developed than all the subsequent men; but was more developed than even the modern man. From the moment he stepped his foot in the world the first man was the vicegerent of Allah as well as His Prophet. It is a point worth consideration why the first man who appeared, appeared as a Divinely appointed authority and Prophet, while it seems more natural according to the evolutionary process that first ordinary men should appear and after they have attained a fairly high degree of development, one of them be appointed a Prophet.

According to the Qur'an the first man held a very high position: When your Lord said to the angels:

"Surely I am about to place a vicegerent in the earth, they said: Will you place therein one who will do harm in it, and will shed blood, while we hymn Your praise and sanctify You? He said: Surely I know that which you know not. And He taught Adam all the names, and then showed them to the angels, saying: Inform Me of the names of these if you are truthful." (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:30-31)

In short the first man who came into being caused surprise to the angels. What is the secret of this? In respect of the first man the expression, ***I breathed in him of My spirit*** (Surah al-Hijr, 15:29) has been used.

This shows that the structure of this being had in it a higher element besides the material elements and it is this higher element which has been described by the above expression. In other words in the structure of this being something very special was put by Allah, who made him His vicegerent: ***"I am about to place a vicegerent (My vicegerent) in the earth."*** (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:30)

Thus the Qur'an gives the impression that the first man who stepped his foot on the earth did so as a Divine authority, a Prophet and a being having contact with the unseen world. Our Imams have laid stress on this origin of man in order to establish that the last man on the face of the earth would also be

holding the same dignified position as the first man. Actually the world of humanity can never be devoid of a being possessing the spirit of I am about to place a vicegerent in the earth. The existence of all other men depends on his existence.

If such a man does not exist, others also cannot exist. Such a man is called 'Divine authority'. By Allah, the world cannot be devoid of an authoritative master appointed by Allah . This sentence has been extracted from the sayings of Nahjul Balaghah and quoted in many books. I have heard the late Ayatullah Burujardi citing it, said that it was a sentence which Imam Ali pronounced while in Basra and that it was regularly reproduced both by the Shi'ah and the Sunnis. This sentence is the concluding part of a tradition reported by Kumayl. He says that one day Imam Ali caught hold of his hand and took him out of the city. When they reached a secluded place known as Jabbin, Imam Ali heaved a deep sigh and said: *"Kumayl, the hearts are receptacles. The most retentive of them are the best. Therefore remember what I tell you. The men are of three types: a Divine scholar, a pupil seeking salvation and a buzzing fly"*. (See Nahjul Balagha, Saying 146).

According to Imam Ali's terminology a divine scholar is not an ordinary scholar, although we often apply this term indiscriminately. He means a scholar 100 per cent devoted to Allah. In this sense perhaps this term can apply only to the Prophets and the Imams. The second group is that of the pupils who receive knowledge from the first group. The third group is of those "who have not sought the light of knowledge and have not resorted to a strong support." After saying this Imam Ali complained of the people of his time. He said that he had great amount of knowledge to impart, but he did not find any one fit to receive it. He added that there were some people intelligent enough, but they wanted to use what they learnt to gain their selfish ends and to exploit religion for their worldly gains.

Therefore he had to withhold knowledge from them. There were others who were good people, but they were fools. They did not understand or understood wrongly. From what Imam Ali said so far it appeared that he was totally disappointed. But that was not the case. He was talking of the majority only, for he added: *"No, not indeed: The earth is never without a divine authority, whether visible and known or hidden and unseen. The existence of such an authority is necessary so that Allah's proofs and arguments may not become invalid. But how many and where are such people? Indeed very few, but very dear to Allah. It is through them that Allah preserves His proofs and arguments. They pass on their knowledge to their likes and cultivate it in the hearts of their counterparts."*

Speaking further about these individuals who receive their knowledge from Divine source, Imam Ali said: *"Knowledge rushes to them giving them insight into the truth."* In other words their knowledge is intuitive, not acquired, and is free from every error and mistake. *"They are endowed direct with the spirit of conviction"*, for they are in direct touch with the unseen world. "What is difficult for those who are accustomed to luxurious living, is easy to them. *"The most difficult thing for those who live in ease and luxury is to devote themselves to Allah."* *"They are familiar with that to which the ignorant are averse. They live in the world while their souls are attached to the highest place."* Their bodies are with the

people in this world, but their souls are somewhere else. The people find them among themselves, but do not know that their souls are attached to some elevated place."

That is the logic of Imamah. That is the reason why there is a chapter in al-Kafi entitled, *Babul Hujjah*. Reports in this chapter say that even if only two persons were left in the world, one of them would be a hujjah or Divinely appointed authority. I propose to quote some extracts from the Babul Hujjah of al-Kafi so that you may become better acquainted with this logic. All other questions such as that the people must have an Imam so that he may dispense justice to them or so that he may resolve the controversies about religious matters, are subsidiary questions. An Imam is not required to administer the government and hence he is not to be chosen by the people. He is above all such things. The administration of government may be called a side business of him. Now we put forward selected words of various traditions so that the logic of Imamah may become clear.

A report from Imam Sadiq: This is a report relating to the Prophets. It is said that a zindiq (a free thinker or an atheist)¹ asked Imam Sadiq how he could prove the existence of the Prophets and the Divine Messengers. The Imam basing his reply on the doctrine of monotheism, said:

"We know for certain that we have a Creator, who is far above us and above all that He has created. That Creator is wise and sublime, but we cannot have direct contact with Him. It is not possible for His creation to see Him, to touch Him or to argue with Him. But we need His guidance, for He alone knows what is in our interest and what is beneficial to us. Therefore there must be some messengers of Him to convey His message to His creation and His slaves and to tell them what is to their advantage and what is detrimental to them. This proves that there are some admonishers appointed by Allah, the Wise, the All-knowing."

About these admonishers (Prophets and Imams) Imam Sadiq says: *"They are wise men, wisely trained and sent with a wise message. They have been created exactly like other people, but still they are different from them."* They have an additional dimension and an additional spirit. *"They enjoy the support of the All-wise and All-knowing who has granted them wisdom. The existence of such a person is essential in every age and every period of time, so that the world may not be devoid of a master (hujjah) having signs showing his veracity and irreprochability."*

Zayd ibn Ali and Imamah

Imam Muhammad Baqir's brother, Zayd ibn Ali was a pious and virtuous man. Our Imams have sanctified him and his uprising. But it is a controversial point whether he claimed Khilafat for himself or sought it for his brother, and his campaign aimed at only 'enjoining good and forbidding evil'. However, it is certain that our Imams have venerated him and have described him as a martyr. A report in al-Kafi says: *"By Allah! He passed away as a martyr."* Another report which we are going to reproduce now shows that he was mistaken. It is a different matter how such a great man made such a grave mistake.

One of the companions of Imam Muhammad Baqir is known as Abu Ja'far Ahwal. He says that while Zayd ibn Ali was under-ground, one day he sent for me and said to me: "If anyone of us rises against the present government will you be prepared to cooperate?" I said: "Yes, provided your father and the brother agree." "I intend to rise myself and have nothing to do with my brother", said he. "In that case I will not cooperate", said I. He said: "Why? Are you not willing to sacrifice your life for me?" I said: "I have one life only. If in this world there was a master (*hujjah*), appointed by Allah, then he who stayed away, would be safe, and he who went out with you, would perish. If there was no master appointed by Allah, then he who stayed away and he who went out with you were alike."

[Hence it was immaterial whether I did or did not join you in your uprising].

Abu Ja'far Ahwal knew what Zayd meant. According to this tradition Ahwal told him that there was a master or a *hujjah* existing in the world and that *hujjah* was Zayd's brother, not Zayd himself. In reply Zayd said what amounted to saying: "How do you know (that my brother is the *hujjah*) while I do not know? My father loved me very much, but he never told me anything about that. He was so fond of me that in my childhood while taking food, he always seated me beside him. Whenever he found that any food was too hot for me, he always cooled it and then put it into my mouth. How can you expect a loving father, who was so affectionate and never allowed my mouth to burn, that he would ever allow me to be burnt in Hell?" Abu Ja'far Ahwal said: "It was because your father was very fond of you that he did not tell you anything about this question. He was afraid that if he told you, you would deny it and thus earn Hell. He was aware of your impertinent spirit. He intentionally kept you in the dark so that at least you might not become hostile to your brother. But he told me the truth so that if I accepted it, I might be saved and if not, I shall be doomed. Fortunately I have accepted the truth".

Abu Ja'far Ahwal says that he asked Zayd who was superior, the members of his family or the Prophets. Zayd replied that the Prophets were. Then Abu Ja'far said: "Prophet Ya'qub said to his son Yousuf who was also a Prophet: ***'My dear son, tell not your brothers of your vision, lest they plot a plot against you.'*** Prophet Ya'qub gave this advice because he loved Yousuf, and he knew that if his brothers came to know that he would attain such a high position, they would immediately become his enemies. The story of your father and brother with you is exactly like the story of Ya'qub with Yousuf and his brothers."

Zayd had no reply to give. At last he said: "Now that you have told me all this, I also may tell you that your friend in Medina (He meant 'your Imam', that is Imam Muhammad Baqir) has apprised me that I would be killed and crucified at the garbage dump of Kufa and that he had a book, in which there was a prediction about my being killed and crucified."

Here Zayd, so to say, turned a new leaf. He advanced an entirely new argument. Anyhow, what he said, supported the view that he believed in the Imamate of his brother. First he said something to Abu Ja'far and continued to talk in the same vein. But when he saw that Abu Ja'far firmly believed in Imamate, he changed the trend of his talk and made clear that he was not unmindful of the true position. He implied that he was launching his struggle with the knowledge and approval of his brother. Abu Ja'far adds that

one year he went to Makkah. There he related this story to Imam Ja'far Sadiq, who confirmed his view.

According to another tradition Imam Ja'far Sadiq said: *"In the world there will always be an Imam."* He is also reported to have said: *"If only two persons were left, one of them would be the master (hujjah) of the other."*

A report from Imam Riza: In this connection we have a large number of traditions. There is a detailed report which is connected with Imam Riza. A man named Abdul Aziz ibn Muslim says: "We were in Marv with Imam Riza when he went to Khurasan while he was still a heir apparent. Once on Friday we were in the Jami' Mosque. The Imam was not present there. In the mosque there were people in a large number and they were discussing the question of Imamat. After the prayers I went to Imam Riza and told him what had transpired there. The Imam sarcastically smiled and said: "These people are ignorant and have deceptive opinions. Allah carried away His Prophet only after He had completed his mission. Allah has revealed the Holy Qur'an which contains all the rules of law and all that is permissible or forbidden. In the Holy Qur'an there is every thing that the people need in connection with their religion. The Holy Qur'an itself says: ***"We have not neglected anything in this Book."*** (Surah al-An'am, 6:38)

In other words, nothing is missing in it. (At least all the rules of law have been described in it).

On the occasion of the Farewell Pilgrimage towards the end of his life the Holy Prophet recited this verse: ***"This day I have completed your religion and have perfected My favour on you and chose Islam as a religion for you."*** (Surah al-Ma'ida, 5:3) Imam Riza continued: "The religion cannot be complete without the doctrine of Imamat. The Holy Prophet departed this world only after he had explained to his ummah (followers) all the main points of their religion, showed them the right way and set up Imam Ali as a conspicuous sign and a rallying point.

In short the Qur'an expressly says that it has not left out anything unsaid. But has it not left out the details and the minor points? Actually it has dealt only with the principal points and the general rules required by the people. One of the main issues dealt with by the Qur'an is the question of Imamat.

The Qur'an indicates that the Holy Prophet was to be succeeded by a man who knew the interpretation of the Qur'an and its true meaning based not on any independent judgement or individual deduction, which might sometimes be right and sometimes be wrong, but based on his Divine knowledge of the true nature of Islam. Allah says that He has mentioned in the Qur'an everything. Even the details were not totally ignored, but were left with him who knew Islam thoroughly. A man knowing Islam thoroughly has always existed and will always be existing among the people. "If any one thinks that Allah has not completed His religion, he refutes the Book of Allah. And anyone who refutes the Book of Allah is an infidel. "Do those who maintain that an Imam can be appointed by the choice of the people, know the value of Imamat and its position in the Ummah?

They think that the selection of an Imam is just like the selection of a commander of the army, while Imam means the person with whose designation, according to the Qur'an, religion has been completed.

We know that the Qur'an does not deal with the minor issues. The knowledge of them has been imparted to the Imam, whose knowledge of Islam is very thorough. People cannot say who is such a person. That is why they cannot elect him, as they cannot elect a Prophet.

"Imamat is too valuable, too sublime, too lofty, too impregnable and too deep for the people to perceive it with their mind or to get to it through their own thinking."

Imamat is above the comprehension of the people. Hence it cannot be decided by election. Only that question can be called elective which can be determined by the people. Religion does not interfere with such a question directly, and basically it should not, because if it does, then what is the use of reason and intellect? Within the range of human thinking man himself is to decide, but beyond that there is no question of human choice. "Imamat is too valuable, too sublime, too lofty, too impregnable and too deep for people to know their Imam or to select him on their own. Allah first chose Ibrahim as His Prophet and friend and only then conferred Imamat on him."

If you want to know the real meaning of Imamat, then you must understand that Imamat is different from what our people nowadays say. It is not the election of a successor to the Holy Prophet for the administration of public affairs only. Imamat is a position that was attained by Prophet Ibrahim after he had been a Prophet. On attaining it he felt so happy that he said: **"And of my offspring"** (Will there be any Imam)? He wanted some of his offspring also to attain the position he had attained. The reply was: **"My covenant included not the wrongdoers."**

We have already explained what this reply means. Does Allah refer only to those who are wrongdoers at the time of the grant of Imamat irrespective of the fact whether previously they had been the wrongdoers or not? It is evident that Prophet Ibrahim could not possibly have asked Allah to grant Imamat to the wrongdoers. Obviously he had in mind only those of his offspring who were good. Therefore this reply meant that Imamat would be granted only to those whose past record was also unblemished.

Imam Riza further said: *"This verse has nullified the possibility of Imamat being conferred on any wrongdoer till the Day of Resurrection and has confined Imamat to the cream among the posterity of Prophet Ibrahim. Allah has honoured him by placing Imamat in those of his posterity who were the chosen and pure."* It means those who were infallible. After saying that, Imam Riza quoted these verses of the Qur'an and based his argument on them: **"And we bestowed on him Ishaq, and Yaqub as a grandson. Each of them we made righteous And we made them Imams who guide by our Command and we inspired in them the doing of good deeds."** (Surah al-Ambiya, 21:72-73)

The Qur'an stresses the fact that Imamat will for ever continue in the posterity of Prophet Ibrahim. The renowned Islamic scholar Muhammad Taqi Shari'ati has in his book, *Khilafat and Wilayat* elaborately discussed the question why the Qur'an which does not believe in ethnic discrimination, has said so. From ethnic point of view posterity is a technical term. How did Prophet Ibrahim's posterity exclusively acquire the capability of holding Imamat is a different question.

Imam Riza added: *"How can these ignorant people elect an Imam?"* Prophet Ibrahim attained Imamat only after he had attained Prophethood. How can these ignorant people elect any body for such a high position? Can such an assignment be elective? *"Imamat is a grade of the Prophets and heritage of the legateses."* It is something traditional in the sense that the competence to get it is transferred from generation to generation, but still it is not strictly hereditary. *"Imamat is vicegerency of Allah and Caliphate of the Holy Prophet."* It is the same vicegerency which Adam was the first to hold. *"Imamat regulates the religion."* It is an organization of the Muslims and a system of their life. Their prosperity and honour depend on it. It is the basis of Islam and the highest department of it. *"The accomplishment of Prayers, Zakat, Fasting, Hajj and Jihad etc. is linked with the existence of an Imam."*

Conclusion:

All this leads us to a logical course of thinking. If we accept it, it has a basis. If somebody rejects it by chance, that is a different matter. This logical course is different from the pursuit of superficial and ordinary questions discussed by the majority of the scholastic theologians. For example, they say that Abu Bakr succeeded the Holy Prophet as the first Caliph, while Ali was the fourth.

Now the theologians discuss the point whether Ali should have been the first Caliph or, for example, the fourth, and whether Abu Bakr fulfilled the conditions necessary for Imamat. They then discuss the qualification which an Imam, in the sense of a head of the Muslim State must possess. No doubt this question is also of basic importance, and from this point of view the Shi'ah have in this connection raised some objections and quite valid too, but on principle it is not proper to confuse the issue of Imamat with the question whether Abu Bakr did or did not possess the qualifications necessary for being an Imam.

As a matter of fact the Sunnis do not believe in Imamat in that sense in which the Shi'ah do. In short, the Sunnis hold that the metaphysical aspects of man mentioned by Allah in connection with Adam, Ibrahim and others up to the Holy Prophet, have come to an end. Now all men are ordinary human beings. At the most there are scholars who have acquired knowledge. They sometimes make a mistake and sometimes do not. Similarly there are rulers. Some of them are irreproachable, whereas some others are wicked. That is the end of the question. The Sunnis do not believe, as we do, in the 'Divine masters' (*hujjah*) having contact with the metaphysical world, for they think that with the demise of the Holy Prophet all this has terminated.

The Shi'ah say that there is no doubt that with the Holy Prophet the Prophethood has come to an end. Now no Prophet will come and no new religion will be brought by any human being. There is only one religion and that is Islam. The Prophet of Islam is the last Prophet. But the question of the *hujjah* and perfect man has not come to an end at all. As the first man was of this category, the last man must also be like him. Among the Sunnis only the sufis believe in this doctrine, though they also give it a different name.

That is why we see that some sufis despite their being Sunnis accept the doctrine of Imamat in some of

their writings in the same sense in which the Shi'ah do. Muhyuddin ibn Arabi is an Andalusian. Andalus (Spain) was one of those countries, the inhabitants of which were not only Sunnis but were also fanatically anti-Shi'ah, having a smack of Nasibiism in them. The reason was that Andalus was originally conquered by the Umayyads who ruled over it for a long time. The Umayyads, bore malice against the Holy Prophet's household. Perhaps in Andalus there were not any Shiites and if there were, their number was as very small. Muhyuddin is an Andalusian, but on account of his gnostic taste he believes that the earth can never be devoid of a *Wali* and *hujjah*.

He accepts the Shi'ah point of view in this connection and recounts the names of the Imams. While mentioning the last Imam, he goes so far as to claim that he personally met Muhammad ibn Hasan 'Askari at such and such place a few years after 600 A.H. But despite all this he has made many statements against Shiah doctrines, and is basically a biased Sunni, but because of his gnostic inclination he admits that it is not possible that at any time there be no *Wali* (or *hujjah* as our Imams say) on the earth. He even claims: "I had an audience with Muhammad ibn Hasan Askari, who is now in occultation and whose age at present is more than 300 years."

Questions and Answers

Question: As you have said, it is true that the main subject of dispute between the Shi'ah and the Sunnis is the question of *Khilafat* and *Wilayat*. Unfortunately most Shi'ah who are not aware of the true nature of *Imamat* ask how it comes that the Qur'an mentions the word *Wilayat* only and the word *Khilafat* is not found in it, while *Khilafat* is different from *Wilayat*. That was the reason why I was keen to ascertain if the word '*Mawla*' has been translated as *Khalifah* also. The other day I found that the well-known dictionary, al-Munjid has given '*Khalifa*' as one of the meanings of *Mawla*. As such in my opinion the question now stands resolved. In this connection I would like to know what the correct word is, *Khalifah* or *Khalif*. Of course the Qur'an has used the word *Khalifah*.

Answer: It is not correct. In the Qur'an the word *Khalifah* has not been used in the sense in which we normally use it, though in the Shi'ah tradition this word has been frequently used in this sense. Anyhow the use of a particular word is not very important.

The significance of the *Khalifah* in the construction *Khalifatullah* (vicegerent of Allah) is quite different from its significance in the construction *Khalifatur Rasul* (successor to the Holy Prophet). We must not lay unnecessary stress on whether or not this word has been used in the Qur'an or the Sunnah. What is important is the sense of the word, not the word itself.

You have said that *Khalif* is one of the meanings of *Mawla*. That is not true. I think you have been mistaken. In al-Munjid the word is *Halif*, not *Khalif*. *Halif* means an ally or a supporter. Among the Arabs two or more individuals or tribes used to take oath to help each other. They were called *Hulafa* and each of them was called *Halif* of the others. As such if the word *Mawla* is used in the sense of *Halif*, it still means a helper and a supporter.

1. At that time the word, 'zindiq' was not an abusive term as it is now. In those days a number of people were called zindiqs and they did not think it insulting to be called so. In our times the same is the case with the word, materialist. Of course a monotheist would never like to be called so, but he who is a materialist, may even be proud of this appellation. As regards the origin of the word, zindiq, there are various theories. Mostly it is believed that the zindiqs were Manichieans who appeared in the beginning of the second century, that is the century in which Imam Sadiq lived. Many westerners and other scholars have discussed the question of the zindiqs in Islam.

They have come to the conclusion that the zindiqs were the followers of Mani. It may be remembered that Mani's creed was not anti-God. Mani himself claimed to be a Prophet. Anyhow, he was a dualist, not a monotheist, and for that matter, more dualist than Zoroaster, for some people believe that Zoroaster was possibly a monotheist, who at least believed in one eternal source of the whole universe, though it cannot be proved from his writings that he believed in one Creator. In contrast, Mani was definitely a dualist and claimed to be a Prophet raised by the god of good. But later Manichaeans tended towards materialism and naturalism, and ceased to believe in anything spiritual.

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