

# Al-Imam al-Rida [a] and the Heir Apparency

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A discussion of the role of the 8th Imam, Imam Ali ar-Rida, and the issues surrounding his nomination as heir to the Abbasid caliph Al-Mamun.

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# Al-'Imam al-Rida [a] and the Heir Apparency

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## 1. Goals and Methods

After the martyrdom of al-'Imam al-Husayn (A) the objective of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), as we see it, was two-fold. Firstly, their goal was to protect Islam against corruption, forgery and mis-interpretation. This was done in several ways. The foremost of them was to establish the authentic Sunnah in the face of other claims which were influenced, to a lesser or greater degree, by the inclinations of existing regimes and the heresies (*ahwa'*) of those in control of them during the Umayyad and the 'Abbasid eras.

Since the corruption (*tahrif*) on the Qur'anic text was out of question, the most dangerous phenomenon that confronted Islam from within was the narration of forged and corrupted traditions ascribed to the Prophet (S). The meanings of certain Qur'anic verses were distorted – particularly those concerning the most important political and social concepts – by the means of fabricated and corrupted hadith. Therefore, the Imams (A) did their best to spread the hadith among the people and employed all the means to extend the range of its circulation throughout the various regions.

Secondly, their objective was to protect the followers of the authentic Islamic path, and those who were close to it in various degrees, from ignorance, deviation and the danger of physical liquidation.

Their protection from ignorance was secured by strong emphasis on the diffusion of Islamic teachings among them, through dispatching missionaries to them, founding centres of religious instruction in various regions, and establishing a rightly-guided authority for them, and these affiliated them to the path of the Ahl al-Bayt (A).

This affiliation was a conscious one, based on knowledge (*ma'rifah*) and conviction, which guaranteed continuity and resistance in the face of trials and difficulties, not one based only on emotional attachment or merely on *taqlid*, for that could not ensure the perpetuity and invincibility of a revolutionary political and ideological movement as sought by the Ahl al-Bayt (A).

They were protected from deviation (*fitnah*) by being persistently and repeatedly prohibited from being assimilated into the infrastructure of an oppressive and irreligious political authority, and by being enjoined to keep aloof from it without dissociating themselves from the rest of the Islamic community.

They were instructed to keep close relations with all the Muslims, on the basis of coexistence with the authorities while abstaining from entering their organization or participating in its establishment so far as it did not harm the general order of the society or go against the basic vital interests of the community

following the path of the Ahl al-Bayt (A).

They were also protected from deviation by being constantly prohibited to take sides with this or that rival party from among the oppressors who struggled for power.

They, as individuals or groups, were protected from being persecuted in their districts or from being exiled or executed by the prescription of *taqiyyah*. We basically understand *taqiyyah* as being an ordinance aimed at the protection of the lives of individuals and their personal interests, so long as that does not violate the basic principles and political commitment to society.

However, when *taqiyyah* leads to the abandonment of the principles or deviation from them in a political issue, or when it goes against political commitment to society, then it is not lawful, because it was introduced to protect the individuals upholding and defending the principles. Thus it should be noted that *taqiyyah* was prescribed to safeguard the principles and to insure their success in the future. It is not reasonable, therefore, that it should become a cause of the weakening or even the destruction of those very principles for the sake of protecting the interests of the individuals.

This objective manifested itself on the plane of practice and reality, after the martyrdom of al-Husayn (A), in the form of a balance between three elements:

- (1) *taqiyyah* on the individual level,
- (2) preservation of the general order of the Islamic society and the Muslim community in respect of administration and public services,
- (3) refusal to grant political legitimacy to the oppressive regime.

The Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) dealt with the existing regimes within these limits. This balance resulted in the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) working with the existing system on an administrative level, in so far as that would preserve the general order of society and provide an atmosphere conducive to safety and freedom of movement for them and their followers.

Thus the goal of safeguarding the ultimate prophecy from corruption would be achieved while preserving the political stand opposing the oppressive regimes, which characterized the path of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), in a live and active state.

A situation such as this has always been a painful one for those Islamic activists who, by virtue of their stand, have various responsibilities towards the society and yet work at a socio-political stage in history during which immediate and complete revolution is not possible. It was necessary for them to ensure, firstly, that political opposition does not damage the foundations of society and upset its general order.

On the other hand, it was necessary to exercise thorough vigilance at every stage so that the fulfilment of those requirements would not lead to the granting of political legitimacy to the oppressive or irreligious

government.

The guidance offered by the lives of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) in direction of political activism, either at the level of the Ummah or that of specific communities within it, will protect the activist from errors and confusion while considering the limits within which he must remain.

When we examine the nature of this goal, the characteristic of both aspects of which have been recorded and demonstrated in the lives of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), we find that, on the one hand, it has the fundamental characteristic of propagating the ultimate prophetic message and safeguarding Islam from distortion. On the other hand, we find that it has a defensive characteristic shown in the protection of the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) from the afore-mentioned dangers.

The most profound significance of both the aspects of this goal lay in the preparation of the Ummah and the renewal of its foundations, after its relapse in the early period of Islam and the consequent deviation in political matters and issues pertaining to government, which in turn were followed by deviation on the legal front. This deviation was regarding the source and authority of the Sunnah, which is the second source of legislation in Islam after the Book of Allah, the Mighty and Sublime.

The object of this preparation was to safeguard the healthy nucleus constituted by the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) and to enable it to expand by attracting a larger number of Muslims to its circle. This would facilitate the establishment of a state on the basis of Islam, following the creation of a wider Islamic base for it.

This base would be committed to the idea of the Islamic state; it would promote it and serve as the point of departure towards it, until God, the Exalted, fulfils His ultimate promise through the appearance of the Mahdi (*Baqiyat Allah*), may God's peace be upon him and may He hasten his appearance.

## **2. The Central Issue**

In order to understand this goal, one must study the social, political and legal aspects of the life of each of the Infallible Imams (A). Here we will study one aspect of the political life of al-'Imam 'Ali al Rida (A), his designation to the heir apparenacy of the 'Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun – which was perhaps the most significant phase in his political life – and the issues related to it.

We will see that al-'Imam al-Rida (A) played the role of an active leader in giving direction to the events even in his situation where he could only react, for his responses stemmed from a precise and universal plan that enabled him not only to counter the problem that he faced but also to carry out his duties of supreme leadership in the Ummah.

Here the discussion revolves around the question of succession, which was the central problem of the Islamic polity after the demise of the Prophet (S). This problem had grown steadily in significance until it reached a climax following the martyrdom of Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (A). It exploded with the revolution of

al-Husayn (A) into a series of crises of political legitimacy throughout the era of the Imams (A) up to the occultation of the Awaited Imam (A). In the period of occultation it assumed other forms of expression.

In the Umayyad and 'Abbasid regimes – as well as other regimes contemporaneous with the 'Abbasids, such as the Umayyad regime in Andalusia, the Fatimid caliphate in North Africa – and other regimes that came after them in various parts of the Islamic world through the ages up to the time of the Ottoman caliphate and the Safavid sultanate – all the rulers identified their regimes, in character and origin, as being Islamic.

They ruled in the name of Islam and governed over the people in matters of peace and war, the economy, politics, the judiciary, social organization and other matters of socio-political life on the basis of their governments being Islamic systems which implemented Islamic laws. The legitimacy of these governments was based on the claim of their being derived from Islam. But what was the source of the legitimacy of actual leadership?

On a theoretical and abstract level, the issue is dissolved, for all claim to be Islamic and apply Islam according to their own understanding of it, in different ways, without being faithful to the Qur'anic text and often disgracefully violating the spirit of the Qur'anic text.

However, on a practical level, there are two very different view-points about the source of the legitimacy of leadership: firstly, the view based on designation (*nass*); secondly, the view which disregards designation (*nass*) and is based on the principle of allegiance (*bay'ah*). The conflict between these two views dominated the Islamic Ummah after the demise of the Noble Messenger (S) up to the end of the Umayyad era, when the 'Abbasid missionary activity (*da'wah*) began.

The principle of designation (*nass*) had been firmly established in the minds of the Ummah as a result of the activities of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) and their companions in educating them, firstly, about the issue of designation, secondly, about the cause of the perverseness of the Umayyad regime and its deviation from Islam on a theoretical and practical level, and thirdly, about the reason for the Umayyad rulers implementing the principle of designation (*nass*) in their own particular way.

For example, Mu'awiyah implemented it by means of designating his heir apparent and seeking prior allegiance (*bay'ah*) for him. Due to all that, the principle of *nass* became the sole basis in the minds of a large section of Muslims, and came to be regarded as the most preferable choice among the rest as the source of the legitimacy of rule on the basis of actual and practical leadership. The principle of *bay'ah* became invalid as the only source of legitimate rule and was no longer anything but a complementary aspect of the principle of *nass*.

When 'Abbasid *da'wah* began, it confronted this reality in the political domain as well as in the mind of the Ummah. It also used all the suggestions and concepts of the past to allude to the principle of *nass*, without making an explicit commitment to it, for the fear that such a commitment would entail handing over power to the legitimate ruler.

Thus the 'Abbasid missionaries exploited the names of the 'Alids and the Ahl al-Bayt (A), and the term *'itrah* (progeny). They constantly used an ambiguous expression which had been used earlier by certain people who had revolted against the Umayyads after the revolution of al-Husayn (A): the call to "*al-rida min aal Muhammad*".

This expression was a new endorsement of the position based on the principle of *nass* – and it was aimed to exploit all the political potential that this principle carried with the Ummah – without explicitly committing to it. This would enable them to make an about-face in a massive publicity operation aimed to misguide the Muslim public opinion. The 'Abbasid missionary activity advanced under this banner, and when it implemented its political plan to overthrow the Umayyad regime and establish the 'Abbasid state, it was based on the principle of *nass*.

From the very first speech of Abu al-'Abbas al-Saffah, after he was acknowledged as the leader in Kufah, the 'Abbasids claimed that they had implemented the political plan of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), the family of 'Ali (A), the Banu Hashim and the descendants of the Prophet (S).

With the implementation of the 'Abbasid plan, three different ideas in the Islamic political thought were alternately used, in order to address the main question in the Islamic political problem during the era of the Infallible Imams (A). The question dealt with the source of the legitimacy of actual leadership after the expiry of all Islamic political entities which traced their origins to Islam and claimed to practise it.

1. The principle of *nass*. This was the principle of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) who devoted themselves to establish it firmly in the mind of the Ummah and to create an awareness in it through it, so that it became, as mentioned, generally acceptable to all the Muslims, whether as the sole formula for legitimacy of rule or as the most preferable one.
2. The principle of *bay'ah*. It completely ignored the principle of *nass* and did not acknowledge it, directly or indirectly.
3. The principle of "*al-rida min aal Muhammad*". It was the formula on which the 'Abbasid missionary activity was based and which was politically implemented. This principle, which in essence was the principle of *bay'ah*, was actually, as we have said, a distortion of the principle of *nass* aimed to exploit its political potential on one hand, and to escape from its political implications on the other. The political implication of the principle of *nass* is government by the Infallible Imam. This was what the 'Abbasids did their utmost to prevent. However, for the success of their missionary activity, they urgently needed the political benefits of the principle of *nass*; hence the slogan of "*al-rida min aal Muhammad*".

Other expressions used by them were: "Alids", "Hashimites", "Ahl al-Bayt," "the Offspring of the Prophet" (*dhurriyyat al-Nabi*), and "the Progeny" (*'itrah*). These were the ideological and political tools they used to achieve their aim, and they accomplished it in the following way. In the mind of the Ummah the principle of *nass* was associated with the Ahl al-Bayt (A). Mentioning *nass* would make one immediately think of the pre-eminent right of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), and speaking of the

Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) in a political context would call to mind the principle of *nass*.

The 'Abbasid missionary activity took advantage of this association and connection between *nass* and the Ahl al-Bayt (A), who were regarded as being the embodiment of the principle of *nass* in Islamic society.

After their victory, the 'Abbasids developed the ideology that served as the basis of vindicating their rule in order to counter the difficulty created by the discovery of the truth by some of the senior leaders of the *da'wah*, who believed that they were active against the Umayyads on the basis of the principle of *nass*. The 'Abbasids had used the slogan 'revenge for the family of Muhammad (S)', as a justification for holding on to political power. They also used the terms 'right' (*al-haqq*) and 'inheritance' (*irth*) to vindicate their ideological stand.

This was a political message understood by the people, and it suggested the principle of *nass* to certain groups of people who did not have strong links with the Ahl al-Bayt (A). The evil 'ulama' and venal thinkers were able, by intellectual and theological maneuvering, to misguide the people about the true meaning of the principle of *nass*.

### **3. New Distortions, and the Dilemma of the 'Abbasid Regime**

After the triumph of the 'Abbasids and the realization of their plan, the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) and their companions did not give up their political activity, based on the principle of *nass*, in the Ummah. Now, they did not only have to deal with the principle of the *bay'ah*. A new, political concept had entered the scene; it was the notion of '*al-rida min aal Muhammad (S)*'. The legitimacy claimed by the 'Abbasids had been acquired on the basis of this formula on the instructions of Ibrahim ibn Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah.

The Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) and their followers faced these new conditions with vigour. A penetrating study of the texts concerning Imamate pertaining to the period following the establishment of the 'Abbasid state will reveal a development in the quantity of these texts, their intellectual and ideological content, and the increased emphasis on the central position of the Imamate in the belief of the Ummah.

The activity of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) and their followers in educating and making the Ummah aware of the political question on the basis of *nass*, in revealing the fabrications of the 'Abbasid regime regarding the legitimacy of actual leadership, and disclosing the ambiguity which was exploited in the slogan '*al-rida min aal Muhammad (S)*' - all that re-awakened the consciousness of the Ummah with regard to the principle of *nass* and the conception of Imamate.

This education on the one hand, and the injustices committed by the 'Abbasid government on the other, served to nurture an atmosphere of revolution in the Ummah based on the principle of *nass*. This was

often done with the slogan of '*al-rida min aal Muhammad (S)*' – the same slogan on whose basis the 'Abbasid state had been established and by which it acquired its legitimacy. This means that the legitimacy of 'Abbasid rule had completely disappeared and the idea of a radical change, instead of one of mere reform, was put forward.

Thus it is evident that the problem which began to seriously trouble the 'Abbasid state regarding the basis of legitimacy of rule was a second political problem resulting from the political and military conflicts within the state between the major forces which formed the caliphal state, as well as the conflicts among the 'Abbasids themselves.

From the reign of al-Mansur, in the early stages of their rule, the 'Abbasids had faced the problem of legitimacy with the policy of suppressing the 'Alids by measures unheard of in history. They also employed legal notions to bear upon the political question, such as: 'right' (*haqq*), 'inheritance' (*irth*), 'kinship' (*qarabah*), and priority of paternal cousins over daughter's sons.

Jurisprudence (*fiqh*), speculation, literature and theology were all used in this political battle, and some heretical theological sects emerged which put forward certain concepts and expressions that were employed in it. However, bitter experience had proved that these repressive measures not only failed, but further nourished the propagation and continuance of revolutionary trends which rejected the 'Abbasid regime.

Al-Ma'mun realized the futility of this method in facing the problem caused by the principle of *nass*. He realized that he could deal successfully with the problem arising from the struggle of factions among the 'Abbasids and the struggle of the major powers in the regime through political and military means. However, he could not deal with the first problem – that of the *nass* – with the same measures, since it was of a different nature and would not yield to such measures. Political measures would not be of any use, and military measures would only aggravate the problem.

The 'Abbasids were very aware of the ineffectiveness of political measures in this kind of predicament and of the counter-productive effects of military measures. It was enough to recall how the Umayyads dealt with the problem of Khurasan at the beginning of the 'Abbasid revolution, in order to learn a lesson from it.

Al-Ma'mun confronted both the problems together. He continued to deal with the second problem using the customary military and political methods, but he faced the first fundamental issue of legitimacy through an understanding of the nature and method of its treatment.

Al-Ma'mun realized that this problem had to be dealt with in a way that was in keeping with its nature. An ideological problem had political effects, so it was not reasonable to treat the effects without treating their cause. The appropriate method should also be ideological. Thus, he conceived the idea of an ideological solution for the ideological problem, and that was to make al-'Imam 'Ali ibn Musa ibn Ja'far (A), called al-Rida, the heir apparent.

The solution was brilliant, for it revived the 'Abbasid *da'wah* and restored effectiveness and credibility to the slogan “*al-rida min aal Muhammad*” by embodying it in the person who represented that slogan in the mind of the Ummah. Thus the slogan remained no longer vague or obscure; rather it was now portrayed in a particular person who represented the principle of *nass* in its complete purity. The brilliance of the idea was that it presented an exemplary solution to the problem, which realized the goal of al-Ma'mun's greatest desire.

On the one hand, it gave legitimacy to the leadership, thus putting an end to the political and ideological problem and legitimating all military and political confrontations with the revolutionary movement. On the other hand, it deferred returning the right (to the Imam of the Ahl al-Bayt [A]), for it was succession and not a transfer of power that was offered. It was doubtful that the heir apparenacy offered would result in sovereign rule, since al-'Imam al-Rida (A) was twenty-two years older than al-Ma'mun.

The idea was also brilliant since, apparently, it completely altered the balance in al-Ma'mun's favour, for the ideological problem which was earlier than the problem of al-Ma'mun and the 'Abbasid regime now became the problem of the followers of the principle of *nass* and the figure who was its embodiment: al-'Imam al-Rida (A).

#### **4. The Problematical Aspect of Heir Apparenacy**

One aspect of this problem is that it is completely natural and understandable that a ruler who unlawfully holds power, as a result of which he is plagued by dangers and difficulties, should authorize the handing over of power after him to the rightful and lawful nominee who is twenty-two years older than him.

This would be carried out in a carefully planned operation by the actual ruler who wished to overcome his difficulties in this way. The explanation of this aspect of the problem is simple after the circumstances, aims and precautions are clarified in light of our knowledge of the central issue in the Islamic political problem.

However, that which is difficult to understand is why the lawful, older nominee should accept this succession. Such an acceptance may imply an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the *de facto* ruler, helping to put an end to his difficulties, in exchange for the promise of handing over the government.

Naturally, it was not possible to fulfil such a promise in view of the difference in the ages of the ruler and his heir apparent, in view of the constant possibility of assassination, and especially in view of what was indicated by al-'Imam al-Rida (A) when he said: “It is a matter that will not be accomplished” and his awareness that al-Ma'mun's moves were not motivated by any conviction that the right to rule should be returned to those worthy of it, but only out of necessity. This is the problematic aspect of the issue.

To solve this problem, we must return to the fundamental aim of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) after the martyrdom of al-Husayn (A). In the light of that we will understand why al-'Imam al-Rida (A) first

refused and then accepted the *bay'ah* of succession to al-Ma'mun.

As we said, this aim was twofold: firstly, to protect Islam from being distorted, falsified and misinterpreted; secondly, to protect the followers of the authentic Islamic path, the followers of the principle of *nass* and those Muslims close to it, from ignorance, deviation and liquidation.

Al-'Imam al-Rida (A) in his refusal and acceptance, and in his term as the heir apparent, adopted a stand appropriate for this aim and took steps which led towards its fulfilment, in the midst of the varying reactions of amazement, resentment and expectation.

He was aware that the allegiance offered to him was the allegiance of death. He was aware of the difficulty of al-Ma'mun and the 'Abbasid caliphate, of the aims of al-Ma'mun in offering him the heir apparenacy, and of his own dilemma in this offer, which held the danger of acknowledging the legitimacy of al-Ma'mun's rule and thus acknowledging the legitimacy of the 'Abbasid caliphate.

He was aware of the traps which would be set in his way, not the least dangerous of which would be the attempt to involve him in the apparatus of a government and an administration which he had not himself set up, and which were not in keeping with his views, his policies, and his character.

He was aware of all that. That is why his first stand towards the offer was to reject it. Al-Ma'mun and his party continued their efforts to persuade him, and he continued to refuse it until he faced veiled and open threats of death, whence he accepted the heir apparenacy, "tearfully and sorrowfully", according to many reports. This was how al-'Imam al-Rida (A) explained his acceptance at various times to some of his companions.

The refusal was understandable. It was in keeping with his general situation, since he was aware of al-Ma'mun's aims and of his own aims in his lifetime. However, the acceptance requires an explanation. The threat of death, inasmuch as it was a threat to a personal life, was not a sufficient reason, in our view, for the acceptance. The position of al-Rida (A) resembled in certain aspects the position of al-Husayn (A), in a form that was in conformity with al-Ma'mun's personality and era, and al-Husayn (A) had made the choice of martyrdom.

We must discover the reason, deeper than that of preservation of personal life, which lay behind al-'Imam al-Rida's acceptance of the heir apparenacy and which was more fitted to his personality as an Infallible Imam and more in keeping with the firm aim of the Infallible Imams.

In fact, we see that preserving personal life was not one of the real reasons for the acceptance, for al-Ma'mun's offer of heir apparenacy itself amounted to a sentence of death for al-'Imam al-Rida (A). We believe that the Imam was aware of it, and perhaps because of that, he did not take any of his family to Marv, presuming that the same fate that was in store for him would befall them.

He was under a sentence of death if he did not accept, and he was under a sentence of death if he did.

The difference between the two conditions was that either the sentence would be put into effect or postponed. We believe that his refusal was aimed to reveal further elements of al-Ma'mun's plans and intentions as well as the network of contacts which directed the operation of succession (*wilayat al-'ahd*). His rejection of the heir apparenacy was not merely a simple reaction.

We believe that al-'Imam al-Rida (A) in his stand – taking into account the difference in eras and the nature of the opposition –strongly resembled the stand of al-'Imam al-Hasan (A). The difference between the two was that al-Hasan (A) faced an immediate or deferred death sentence by withholding what was in his power to give. Al-Rida (A) faced immediate or deferred sentence, on the basis of the false offer that he would gain his usurped rights in the future.

But in order to negate the legitimacy of this right, he chose deferment – like al-'Imam al-Hasan (A) – since it was more suited to the aim of the Imams (A). Al-'Imam al-Husayn (A) chose immediate death since it was more in keeping with his circumstances and the circumstances of the Ummah of his time, more closely connected to the firm aim of the Infallible Imams, and more destructive of his enemy, Yazid and the Umayyad regime.

## 5. The Causes

In order to understand the underlying cause for al-'Imam al-Rida's (A) acceptance of the fatal allegiance, we must look for the answers on two levels. Firstly, what might have happened if he did not accept, and secondly, what was his aim when he did accept?

Firstly, what might have happened if al-'Imam al-Rida (A) did not accept the fatal allegiance? We believe that which might have happened is as follows:

**a. Death.** It was necessary for him to avoid being killed, not to preserve his own life, for the Imams did not value their own lives and consider them important except as a means of serving the Ummah. His death would open the door wide for tribulations for the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), who would then have no refuge or guide. We must link the avoidance of death with the essence of the issue of Imamate and its timing, when we note how young al-'Imam al-Jawad (A) was at the time the offer of heir apparenacy was made. His life was committed to achieving the aims and to avoiding the dangers.

He explained his acceptance to one of his companions who asked him about it, saying: “I chose acceptance over death.” To another companion who asked him: “What made you become involved in the (matter of) heir apparenacy (*wilayat al-'ahd*)?” he answered: “That which made my grandfather (i.e. 'Ali [A]) to become involved in the council (*shura*)?”

We must note that he (A) was compelled to give this simple explanation, acceptable to the people, that he being on his guard against being killed, or the ambiguous explanation in which he made al-'Imam 'Ali (A) his precedent. We must also note that he gave explanations of saving himself from being killed in

some of his other discussions.

However, we must be aware that he was compelled to give this kind of explanation, for he was not in a position to speak openly about the reasons underlying his acceptance, in order not to disclose his plan, the reasons why it was necessary, and his actual objective.

He was under surveillance; his conversations and his letters were controlled. He lived in the same conditions as al-'Imam al-Hasan (A) and bore its agonies, as when he heard someone say to him: "Peace be on you, O humiliator of the believers", without being able to explain his ordeal to the people, not even to many of his confidants. He had to suffer martyrdom every day while he still lived, protecting those whom he loved and defended with his life, while they misunderstood and misinterpreted his actions!

This and other similar situations reveal to us how forlorn the responsibility of leadership was, isolated as he was even from the people closest to him, sad and distressed even in the radiant moments when difficult decisions were taken without being able to explain their reasons. How many agonies and pains did the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) suffer because of that, especially Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (A) who had the greatest share of this kind of suffering!

**b.** It was possible that he might not have been killed, but even then it was certain that there would be an increase in the repression, persecution and exile of the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt (A). In this way, al-Ma'mun would be able to put pressure on him and take his revenge.

**c.** It was possible that his rejection of the heir apparenacy might have led al-Ma'mun's enemies to exploit the situation, which would have added to the stormy revolutionary reactions on the Islamic scene at that time. Moreover, al-Ma'mun's overthrow was in the interests of the hard-line 'Abbasids, the party of al-'Amin, with their attitude to the 'Alids and their hatred of the Iranians; for the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) did not have the ability to take over the government and replace al-Ma'mun after his downfall.

**d.** It was possible that the refusal might have led to a wide-ranging propaganda against the Imam (A), to the effect that he had let a valuable opportunity pass by, and that in turn might have led to confusion and disarray among the people following the Ahl al-Bayt (A), who would have been subjected to persecution, exile, and intimidation. The inevitable question would have been raised in this dilemma: 'Why didn't he accept when the caliphate was offered to him?', instead of the question:

'Why did he accept?' We may recall circumstances similar to this in the issue of the arbitration after Siffin and that which took place in regard to the issue of the truce (*sulh*) with al-'Imam al-Hasan (A).

**e.** Finally, we may ask: Had al-'Imam al-Rida (A) insisted on refusing the offer, wouldn't al-Ma'mun have been able to find an 'Alid substitute, an important member of society, whom he could appoint as successor? There were personalities among the Zaydis who were prepared for such an undertaking.

There were also independent 'Alid personalities ready to accept this position. If this occurred, it was certain that the results would have been totally negative, and no new, positive achievements would have been realized by rejecting the offer. This is what such an occurrence could have led to, together with the disagreement that could arise among the followers of the principle of *nass*.

Secondly, what was his aim when he did accept?

**a.** It was to avoid all the negative results which would have ensued from his refusal. He had removed the sentence of death on himself, thus avoiding the occurrence of a change in the leadership of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) during a critical period.

He had also avoided a new wave of terror, exile and execution against the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), and prevented the hardline 'Abbasid faction from taking full control of the regime. In fact, he had created circumstances suitable for destroying this faction and had neutralized its capacity for political activity and its influence on the course of events.

He had prevented confusion and disorder among the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt (A).

Finally, he had prevented al-Ma'mun from substituting him with 'an 'Alid successor, through whom he could exercise a policy of repression against the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), using the principle of *nass* as an excuse.

**b.** By his acceptance, he was able to get in touch with people who would not have dared to communicate with him, had he not been the heir apparent. Thus, there gathered around him the Murji'ites, the Ahl al-Hadith, the Zaydis, the Ahl al-Sunnah and all the Shi'ite sects.

Through this contact, he was able to work with them on the basis of the principle of *nass*. Through it, he also enabled the traditionists and theologians on the path of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) to come into safe and free contact with these opposing sects, and put forward intellectual and political issues for calm, objective, and learned discussion.

Al-Imam al-Rida (A) himself practised this kind of wide-flinging intellectual activity. We should not underestimate the positive intellectual and political results which were achieved in the interest of the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) from this contact and interaction.

**c.** He enabled the intellectual leadership on the path of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) to communicate and interact, freely and safely, with all classes of people, on the basis of the principle of *nass*. Thus the principle of *nass* became more deeply rooted in the minds of the people and more effective in confronting the evil and misleading designs of the government and the corrupt religious scholars who aided it. It also gained greater acceptance among the upper classes.

These positive and negative causes were not all defensive, but were a combination of defensive and offensive. Some of them were defensive and precautionary, while others were aggressive and

penetrative.

Thus, after knowing the reasons for al-Ma'mun's offer, these are the possible causes for al-'Imam al-Rida's (A) acceptance of the offer of the heir apparenacy. What were the results, as far as achievement of the aims was concerned?

## 6. The Results

Al-Ma'mun had achieved his immediate and urgent objectives but had failed to achieve his strategic objective. Al-Rida (A) had achieved his immediate and urgent objectives, and was successful in achieving his strategic objective as well.

1. Al-Ma'mun had achieved his aim of restraining revolutionary activities against the 'Abbasid regime, whether within groups following the principle of *nass*, or within the dissenting opposition who did not accept that principle. Providing the revolution with revolutionaries depended, in both the cases, on the hostile Muslim population.

They saw in the acceptance of the heir apparenacy by al-'Imam al-Rida (A) a clear sign for the need to establish a truce between themselves and the regime, and so realized that armed revolutionary activity during that period was unreasonable. Perhaps some revolutionary leaders had also reconciled with that because they no longer had the means to arouse the people and to mobilize them for the revolution.

2. Al-Ma'mun had achieved his aim of creating a wider base for the political acknowledgement of his caliphate, since the allegiance to al-Rida (A) necessitated a renewal of allegiance to al-Ma'mun and an allegiance by many who had not previously acknowledged him. Thus, as a result of the allegiance to the successor, a united stand was taken by all during al-Ma'mun's rule. We may notice here what al-Ma'mun wrote in the document of heir apparenacy: "The family (Ahl al-Bayt) of the Amir al-Mu'minin (i.e. al-Ma'mun) paid allegiance to the Amir al-Mu'minin and to al-Rida (A) after him, as did the commanders and troops of the city, and all the Muslims."

He clearly asked for a renewal of allegiance to himself on this occasion, not only for allegiance to the heir apparent. However, he demanded sole obedience to himself from those who paid allegiance, as he stated in his document: "And hasten to obedience to Allah and obedience to the Amir al-Mu'minin". He did not include his successor in this statement and this reveals some of the hidden aspects in his plan.

3. He achieved his aim of creating great confusion among his enemies in the 'Abbasid household and their Arab supporters, who were partisans of al-'Amin. This made them too weak to resist him and struggle against his regime. They became fragmented, since the people moved away from them, and the popular base which no longer had an issue to fight over, broke up.

These were the urgent and immediate aims of al-Ma'mun on which the survival and stability of his rule depended. The continuance of revolutionary activities against him, the existence in many regions of the

empire of many groups of Muslims who had not paid allegiance to him, and the conspiracies of the 'Abbasid household against him – these were factors which could have led to the downfall of his regime.

Al-Ma'mun achieved these aims and ensured the stability and survival of his regime. Al-'Imam al-Rida (A) also achieved his urgent and immediate aims by accepting the heir apparenacy, the allegiance of death. His aims justified this, and all or most of them were realized.

On the strategic level, however, al-Ma'mun had failed while al-Rida (A) had been successful.

## 7. Success and Failure

Al-Ma'mun's strategic aim had been to make his own caliphate, and the caliphate of the 'Abbasids in general, an expression of the principle of *nass* in the minds of the Muslims in general, and in the minds of the followers of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) in particular.

This was one of the oldest plans on which 'Abbasid missionary activity (*da'wah*) and thereafter the 'Abbasid state were based, for among the claims which were the basis of the *da'wah* and the state was the declaration about the *wasiyyah* from 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (A) to Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah, to Abu Hashim 'Abd Allah ibn Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah, to 'Ali ibn 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas, to his son Muhammad ibn 'Ali, to Ibrahim, the Imam. Al-Saffah referred to this declaration in his first speech after allegiance was paid to him in Kufah. It was also quoted in Kufah, Madinah, and other places by Dawud ibn 'Ali and various other 'Abbasid leaders.

This was al-Ma'mun's strategic aim. When that was impossible for him to achieve, there was a substitute strategic aim, i.e., to remove the principle of *nass* as an ideological, doctrinal principle bound to the core of religious belief, and to turn it into a mere political formula devoid of any ideological or doctrinal content – a formula like that of other political and religious groups and parties fighting on the Islamic stage.

This aim of al-Ma'mun is evident in the many debates arranged by him between al-'Imam al-Rida (A) and the many groups of religious scholars, theologians, philosophers, and men of letters. He summarized it in a statement of his to al-'Imam al-Rida (A): “I consider the differences of our Shi'ah concerning that – the legitimacy of rule – to be a result of heresy (*hawa*) and bigotry.”

The first aspect of this aim made use of the unity of the Hashimite house with its 'Alid and 'Abbasid branches, and then its political unity, to make it, in its appearance and meaning, a firmly rooted reality in the mind of the Ummah. The second aspect of the aim tried to, show al-'Imam al-Rida (A) as a political, worldly, and maneuvering figure.

The achievement of this aim enabled political interaction with the principle of *nass*, and made it possible to make an alliance with it, enter into settlements with it, and to shape it like any other political formula. This was the strategic aim of al-Ma'mun, while the strategic aim of al-'Imam al-Rida (A) was to prevent al-Ma'mun from achieving his objective.

All al-Ma'mun's actions in the issue of succession were directed towards achieving this aim. The negative stand adopted by al-'Imam al-Rida (A) was to frustrate al-Ma'mun's conspiracy regarding the principle of *nass* while his positive stand was to firmly root the principle of *nass* in the mind of the Ummah, as it was closely linked to Islamic belief and was not merely a political formula.

We find in the life of al-'Imam al-Rida (A), before and after the fated allegiance, attitudes and statements which illustrate his plan of protecting himself from falling into the trap of al-Ma'mun's plan and which are the signs of confrontation in this silent battle about the strategic aim of each one of them. In what follows, we will present some of these signs.

To form a complete or an approximate picture of the efforts of al-'Imam al-Rida (A) in this battle, we need to make a comprehensive examination of all his words and deeds in the legal field and in the field of intellectual guidance.

1. We come across following statements in history concerning al-Rida's continued rejection and then his acceptance of the heir apparenacy after al-Ma'mun and his aides began to make death threats: "He accepted the heir apparenacy, woefully and sorrowfully"; "He was in severe distress and under a great trial"; "He remained saddened and grieved until his death." "He would pray: 'O Allah, if my release (from suffering) lies in death, then hasten the hour for me.' " "He said to one who rejoiced at the ceremony of allegiance: 'Do not rejoice, for it is a matter which will not be accomplished.'"

This is the picture of the Imam's condition as seen by the traditionists and historians after his decision to accept, and these were some of his statements.

In this and similar ways, he expressed his dislike and distaste of this matter, and spread it among the people by speaking and writing of it to his confidants, so that everyone became aware of it. Historians and traditionists have reflected its wide knowledge among the people.

2. His stand in Neyshapur when he dictated the famous hadith to thousands of religious scholars and traditionists, and to the rest of the people:

"The declaration (*kalimah*), 'There is no god but Allah', is My stronghold; whoever enters My stronghold is secure from My punishment." Then he (al-'Imam al-Rida) said: "On its conditions (i.e. conditions of the '*kalimah*'), and I am one of its conditions."

In this way he made a public announcement, while on his way to the heir apparenacy, of the principle of *nass* and his position on it. It is for us to estimate the profound and wide-spread reactions caused among the masses and the political and educated circles by such an announcement.

3. When he was paid allegiance to as the heir apparent, he stipulated its conditions to al-Ma'mun completely divesting the heir apparenacy of its power and political content, which al-Ma'mun had hoped al-Rida (A) would exercise so that he could achieve his strategic aim. He imposed the following

conditions on al-Ma'mun: "That he would not appoint or dismiss anyone, or abolish a practice, or alter anything in existence, and that he would be an advisor on the matter from a distance."

After being appointed heir apparent, the Imam resisted all attempts of al-Ma'mun to force him into activities of power and draw him into the administrative affairs of the 'Abbasids. The climax of those attempts of al-Ma'mun was his offer to al-Rida (A) to go to Iraq, in order to manage the affairs of the caliphate from there. The conditions laid down by the Imam reflected a profound and comprehensive awareness of the nature of the situation from its objective, ideological and political aspects.

As regards the objective aspect, the 'Abbasid regime was made up of ruling and administrative organizations controlled and linked by a network of alliances which had become corrupt. These organizations and alliances guarded themselves against all intervention from the outside and either absorbed such intervention or destroyed it, or, if that were not possible, removed it. When they were unable to absorb the Imam, they tried to destroy him or remove him from their circle.

As regards the political and ideological aspects, the participation of the Imam would mean his receiving instructions and guidance from al-Ma'mun, and recognizing the latter as "Amir al-Mu'minin" and the legitimate ruler of the Islamic Ummah. This is what al-Ma'mun wanted in order to achieve his aim of being included in the *nass* formula so as to apply and regulate it himself, with the Imam as a representative of the political formula with which the existing government would be allied.

The conditions laid down by al-Rida (A) had frustrated al-Ma'mun's plan. We believe that al-Ma'mun did not expect these conditions, for the success of his plan depended on the Imam entering the network of the alliances of power and becoming entangled in its problems and hostilities. This would result in people making accusations against him and directing their anger towards him, thus tarnishing his pure and sacred image among them. In this way al-Ma'mun would achieve his aim of transforming the formula of *nass*, if he could not be included in it, into a mere political formula, and he would display the Imam as a worldly person and political maneuverer. Al-Imam al-Rida (A) had avoided falling into this trap by setting these conditions, which transformed him from being a partner of al-Ma'mun – as the heir apparenacy made necessary – to being a witness against him and one of his victims.

4. In his speech made before al-Ma'mun and important state officials, influential people, notables from among the leaders of public opinion, and others after the Imam was paid allegiance to as heir apparent, the Imam (A) confined himself to saying:

We have a right over you through the Messenger of Allah, and you have a right over us through him; so if you have fulfilled that (our right) towards us, we must (fulfil) the right towards you.

The substance of this statement was repeated in many of his replies and discussions, like his comparison of his own and al-Ma'mun's positions to those of the Prophet Joseph and the king of Egypt, and like his statement:

Whosoever follows the Messenger of Allah is entitled to receive from him.

5. His many letters and discussions in which he constantly affirmed the formula of *nass*, of which is a letter about the articles of faith which he had written in answer to a request from al-Ma'mun:

The Imam is the proof of Allah over His creation and the source of His knowledge, and obedience to him is incumbent.

These are some examples of his statements and actions with which he confronted al-Ma'mun's plan, and a researcher will certainly come across many others. In order to clarify this and other issues in the life of al-'Imam al-Rida (A), it would be very useful to examine, classify and analyze all the legislative and instructive texts which originated from him during the heir apparenacy, and to compare them with those which pertain to the period before it. That will reveal new aspects of this luminous and noble life.

The statements and actions with which the Imam (A) confronted al-Ma'mun's plan in order to achieve his strategic aim, together with the reasons for acceptance, led to the following results:

- a. They firmly established the formula of *nass* in the mind of the Ummah.
- b. They created an opposition within the regime on an ideological, political and popular level (we can regard the popular sentiments, expressed during the incident of the prayer of the festival (*'Id*) as an indication of this phenomenon).
- c. They led al-Ma'mun to adopt a defensive attitude, for he felt that the principle of *nass* would have a popular reaction in society.

We will give an important example of the extent of actual influence that al-'Imam al-Rida (A) had on a public level. During the public outburst following the death of al-Fadl ibn Sahl and the attack of the commanders and troops on al-Ma'mun's residence, the latter took refuge from them and asked the Imam (A) to intervene and save him.

The Imam came out to meet them and instructed them to disperse, which they did. A historical report describes this scene: "He approached the people and by Allah, they fell over each other, and he did not signal to anyone except that he ran and continued (running) and did not stop."

This incident shows the strong influence which the Imam had over the commanders and troops and those who were with them, despite the fact that in accordance with the conditions that he had laid down he did not intervene in any matter related to political authority so that he might be an object of hope or fear on that account. Thus, he was influential due to a cause which was not political or governmental but ideological, i.e., the belief in the *nass* and the obedience which that entailed.

Al-Ma'mun realized through his political experience that the appearance of these reactions demanded an end of this experiment, the experiment of heir apparenacy. He discovered that he had failed to realize

his strategic aim as regards *nass* and that it was the Imam who had been victorious in this field. So he preferred to be content with the achievements of his immediate and urgent aims, before there was a reaction to the Imam's victory regarding *nass*.

This would have created an irredeemable situation, in which the caliphate of al-Ma'mun and the 'Abbasids would have fallen into turmoil and swept away in a revolution which upheld the banner of *nass* in its purity.

Thus, he ended the allegiance of death by poisoning al-'Imam al-Rida (A).

In this way, al-'Imam al-Rida (A) became another one of those for whom Allah seeks retaliation (*tha'r*) in the battlefield between Islam and error. Tears were shed for him, hearts grieved for him, and he became an excellent model for those striving in the way of Allah and the oppressed.

When we see the similarity between al-'Imam al-Rida's acceptance of the heir apparenacy and al-'Imam al-Hasan's (A) acceptance of it, and then the similarity between al-'Imam al-Rida's acceptance of the allegiance of death and the decision to embrace martyrdom by al-'Imam al-Husayn (A), we are in the final stage of the study.

When estimating the effects on Islamic society during the era of al-'Imam al-Rida (A), of its immediate and urgent aims, and the greater goals of the Islamic movement in the history of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), we also see a resemblance between the acceptance of heir apparenacy by the Imam and the treaty of Hdaybiyyah.

The Messenger of Allah (S) complied with the offer of the Quraysh – just as al-Rida (A) accepted al-Ma'mun's offer – which amazed many of his companions, angered others, and was accepted by those among them who possessed awareness. Some saw in the action of the Messenger of Allah (S) a granting of undeserved concessions to the Quraysh, but the outcome of the treaty of Hdaybiyyah was a victory, in the near future, of the strategic objectives of Islam.

The acceptance of the heir apparenacy resulted in a victory, in the near future, of immediate and urgent aims, and of the strategic objective of al-'Imam al-Rida, in view of his being the guardian of Islam.

The former was one of the battles of Islam against disbelief (*kuf'r*) on the level of revelation (*tanzil*), and the latter was one of the battles of Islam against disbelief on the level of interpretation (*ta'wil*).

May Allah's blessing be on al-'Imam al-Rida (A) and his fathers and his descendants, the pure, among the former people and the latter. Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds

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