

Imam Ali – Successor And Flag Bearer Of The Prophet

قَالَ لَهُ وَ عَلَيْكَ السَّلَامُ يَا أَخِي وَ يَا وَصِيِّي وَ خَلِيْفَتِي وَ صَاحِبَ لِوَائِي قَدْ أَذِنْتُ
لَكَ

My father replied, "Peace be upon you too, O brother, successor, vicegerent, and bearer of my Flag. I allow you." Ali thus went with them under the cloak.

In the *Tradition of the Cloak*, the Holy Prophet (SA) also defines the position of Imam Ali (AS) by mentioning four different roles which he assumes in relation to the Prophet. They are as follows: 1) Brother 2) Successor (Wasi) 3) Vicegerent (Caliph) 4) Bearer of the standard or flag

Each of these roles is great in its scope and is in itself enough to bring immense honor to the person who assumes that role. One can only imagine how great and virtuous such person who assumes all four roles is.

Role Of Brotherhood

After migrating to Al-Madinah the Muhajiroon (the Migrants) and the Ansar (The Local Helpers) became so friendly with one another as if there was no difference of the tribe or the place of origin between them. It appeared that all of them belonged to one large family. They treated their properties as common, their honor and respect as common, and shared their happiness and sorrows together. This was a true example of unity and integrity. To make these bonds stronger, the Prophet (SA) repeated the establishment of brotherhood between individuals of the two groups as he had done with those in Makkah.

In the view of experts, brotherhood can be strong only between individuals of the same nature. If the natures are different, and the individuals come together for whatever reason, the togetherness will be temporary. The Prophet (AS) kept this factor in mind when he established brotherhood between individuals from the two groups. He closely studied the natures of the individuals before declaring them brothers. When he saw that any two persons had a lot in common, he named them brothers.

According to many narrations including Al Hakim in his *Mustadrak*, Ibn Abbas said: “The Holy Prophet (SA) assigned brotherhood among his companions, so he assigned Abi Bakr to Umar, Talha to Zubair, and ‘Uthman ibn A’ffan to Abdul Rahman ibn Uof. So Ali ibn Abi Talib said to the Prophet, “*Oh Messenger of Allah, you have designated brotherhood among your companions, so who is my brother?*” The Prophet (SA) answered, “*Oh Ali, are you not pleased that I become your brother?*” So Ali said, “*Yes, Oh Prophet of God!*” The Prophet (SA) replied, “*You are my brother in the life of this world and in the hereafter.*”

Certainly, it is not a coincidence that the Prophet (SA) left Imam Ali (AS) to be the last to assign brotherhood so that his case stands out in front of all the companions and the question is raised as to “Who is the brother of Ali?” One can imagine that no one expected for the Prophet (SA) to declare himself as the ‘brother’ of Ali. What a great honor for Imam Ali (AS) which speaks volumes of the great status which he enjoys in the eyes of Allah (SWT)! It is not possible for the Prophet (SA) to designate Imam Ali (AS) as his brother without prior divine approval in this regards, so his declaration in the event of brotherhood is certainly a sign and indication of Allah’s pleasure towards Ali and his superiority in His eyes.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the purpose of assigning brotherhood in this event was to pair up a companion from the Muhajireen with a companion from the Ansar. However, in the case of Imam Ali (AS) and the Prophet (SA), they do not fulfill the criteria of being from the two groups. This is yet an indication that the brotherhood between them is not random and is rather intentional and without mistake.

One must also understand that this brotherhood does not only signify the common Islamic brotherhood that is mentioned in the verse,

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ.

“The Believers are all brothers.” (49: 10).

This brotherhood is of a superior level and a reflection of the nearness and attachment between two individuals.

If this was just a common bond of friendship, then Imam Ali (AS) already enjoyed it because of being a

Muslim and of the same descent as the Prophet (AS). What was the need of public declaration of their brotherhood? Certainly, this event signifies the eternal spiritual brotherhood between the two which will translate itself into the position of successorship after the Prophet's demise. It also highlighted the similarity between the superior character and nature of Imam Ali (AS) as that of the Prophet (AS).

When Imam Ali (AS) was been declared by the Prophet (AS) to be his brother, it proved that he was the only person amongst the Muslims deserving of that position! This choice is not because of the ancestral affinity but it is on the basis of identical qualities of the two individuals.

Role of Wasi (Guardian) and Caliph (Vicegerent)

The proven track record of the Almighty Creator (SWT) confirms that most if not all of the past prophets and messengers appointed a successor(s) before they departed this world for the purpose of overlooking the affairs of the nation at their time and the message which they have delivered.

The idea of assigning a "backup" is logical and prevalent in our practical lives. For example, when a manager plans a vacation, he leaves behind a second person in command to assume his management responsibilities, and when the President of a country is absent, the Vice President steps forward to take over. If this is the natural course of action when it comes to mundane matters, then isn't it all the more important that the idea of successorship be implemented in religious and eternally important affairs?

Isn't it logical and rather necessary that a prophet or messenger appoint a successor and guardian after him to protect and look after the message which he has delivered? The Holy Prophet (SA) confirms this logic as he said: *"For every prophet there is a Wasi and heir, and my Wasi and heir is Ali."* (Kifayat al Talib)

Throughout the course of the Prophet's life, he took every opportunity to set the stage for Imam Ali (AS) to become his successor, guardian, and Caliph. Ali (AS) has been tested in many occasions and has proven to be worthy of that honorable status. The Messenger of Allah (SA) also told his daughter Fatima (AS) in this regards, *"I am the last of the prophets, and the best of them, and the most beloved of creatures to Allah the Exalted and your father. My Wasi is the best of the Awsiyaa (guardians) and the most beloved of them to Allah, and he is your husband."*

Furthermore, Ibn Abbas narrates: "I was sitting with a young man from Banu Hashim with the Holy Prophet (SA) when a star dropped. The Prophet (SA) said, 'Whoever this star descends on his house is my Wasi after me.' The young Hashemite rose and followed the star and found it descending on Ali's house. (Tarikh Dimashq)

It was on the day of Ghadeer which took place on the 18th of Dhul-Hijjah year 10 A.H. when the Prophet (SA) officially announced and inaugurated Ali ibn Abi Talib to become his successor after receiving divine revelation ordering him to appoint Ali for this position,

“O Messenger! Deliver what has been revealed to you from your Lord; and if you do it not, then you have not delivered His message, and Allah will protect you from the people; surely Allah will not guide the unbelieving people.” (5:67)

Sure enough, the Prophet (SA) executed the command of Allah (SWT) and he stopped at the place of Ghadeer Khum on his way back from the Farewell pilgrimage. He gathered all the Muslims and announced the divine appointment of Ali ibn Abi Talib (AS) to be his successor, Wasi (guardian), and Caliph. He delivered an exceptional lengthy sermon where he enumerated the virtues of Ali.

Hafiz Abu Ja'far Muhammad Bin Jarir Tabari writes in his book *Kitabul Wilayah* that the Prophet (SA) stated in the beginning of his renowned address at Ghadir Khum:

"The angel Gabriel has conveyed Allah's command to me that I stop at this place and inform the people that Ali Bin Abu Talib is my brother, my successor, my Caliph (Vicegerent) after me. O men! Allah has made Ali your Wali (guardian), and Imam (guide). Obedience to him is obligatory on each one of you; his command is supreme; his utterance is truth; curse be on him who opposes him; Allah's mercy be on him who befriends him."

It is also interesting to observe that the Prophet (SA) mentioned the titles *Wali*, *Mawla*, and *Imam* for Ali (AS) in his sermon over 27 times, whereas he used the word *Khalifa* for him only three times. Even under the Sunni implication of the word *Khalifa* (successor)—which limits it to political rule—it is clear that the Prophet (SA) stressed spiritual leadership in his speech, which would guarantee the salvation of those who follow the Imam and would lead them towards Paradise.

Worldly issues never took priority for the Prophet (SA) and his successors. Imam Ali (AS) himself has said: *“By Allah, this world of yours is more despicable in my eyes than a pig bone in the hand of a leper.”* (Nahjul Balagha, maxim 236)

Thus, Imam Ali's exclusive qualification for political rule is only one of the natural outcomes of the guardianship (*Walaya*) that the Prophet (SA) established for him on behalf of Allah (SWT) on the day of Ghadeer. In this manner, authority of Imam Ali (AS) and his pure descendants is still effective over the remaining believers until the Day of Judgment, irrespective of the support of the majority of people for them or their political authority.

Role of Standard-Bearer

Throughout the course of the battles and battalions which took place in the early days of Islam as the minority group of believers tried to stand up against the supporters of falsehood and the idolaters, there was one consistent person who was always at the forefront and was the superstar and hero behind all the victories in the battlefield.

He was none other than the courageous Ali ibn Abi Talib (AS) who became very well-known for his

unmatched excellence and his heroic accomplishments such that all of Arabia feared to face him in war. Imam Ali (AS) was almost always the standard bearer of the Prophet (SA) who carried the symbol which represented Islam and the Muslims.

In general, the flags that were raised in war between two opposing groups held such importance in those days such that if the flag dropped to the ground, the whole morale and spirits of the army fell down and the sign of defeat was insinuated. Hence, the role of “standard-bearer” was very important in the battlefield and it was usually given to the individual who is honorable in the eyes of his people and who most closely represents the values and principles of that which the army is fighting for.

It was no coincidence that Imam Ali (AS) was usually the standard bearer in the battlefield as the Prophet (SA) would say to Ali, “*You are the bearer of my standard in the hereafter, just as you are its bearer in the life of this world.*” (Al Fada’el)

It is narrated in *Tarikh Dimashq* that Anas ibn Malid asked the Prophet (SA) who would be the bearer of his flag on the Day of Resurrection. He (SA) answered, “*The bearer of my flag in this life (and he pointed to Ali ibn Abi Talib).*” In another tradition in regards to Ali, the Prophet (SA) said to him “*I prayed to Allah (SWT) that He (SWT) designate you as my standard bearer and it is the greatest flag of Allah. It has written on it, ‘The victorious are the ones who win the Paradise.’*”

Logically speaking, the person whom the Prophet (SA) appoints to become his standard-bearer must possess very noble traits that are aligned with what the Prophet (SA) would expect and be pleased with. The standard-bearer of Islam must be the *most* pious Muslim among the Prophet’s companions, just as we expect that the standard-bearer of the polytheists to be one of the most staunch disbelievers among the party of falsehood. The status of being the holder of the Prophet’s flag is certainly a grand position which speaks volumes of the rank which Imam Ali (AS) has attained, not only in this life but also in the hereafter.

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