

A Perspective of Imamah in Nahjul Balaghah

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There is a famous tradition from the Holy Prophet (S) recorded by both – the Shias and the Ahlul Sunnah traditionalists:

'One who dies without recognizing the Imam of his time, dies the death of ignorance.'

This means that even if a person accepts and conforms to all the Islamic beliefs and puts in practice all the edicts, but dies without recognizing the Imam of his time, his death will be on ignorance and apostasy. Such a person is condemned to eternal Hellfire regardless of his deeds in this world.

This is because good deeds will only benefit a person provided his beliefs are correct, as espoused by the Qur'an and traditions. Hence, any person, who wants to secure himself from the raging fire of hell, should necessarily possess the recognition of the Imam of his time and not simply rely on his worship and virtuous deeds.

Two kinds of Imams

The Holy Qur'an has mentioned two types of leaders (Imams). The first type is the one who leads the people towards Hell. Allah declares:

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَدْعُونَ إِلَى النَّارِ ۖ وَيَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ لَا يُنصَرُونَ

'And We made them Imams who call to the Fire, and on the Day of Resurrection they shall not be assisted.' (Qur'an, 28: 41)

It means that the end of the one who accepts such an Imam will be in Hell.

The second group of Imams guides the people by Allah's command. Surah Sajdah points out:

وَجَعَلْنَا مِنْهُمْ أُمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا لَمَّا صَبَرُوا ۖ وَكَانُوا بِآيَاتِنَا يُوقِنُونَ

'And We made of them Imams to guide by Our command when they were patient, and they were certain of Our communications.' (32: 24)

قُلْ هَلْ مِنْ شُرَكَائِكُمْ مَنْ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْحَقِّ ۗ قُلِ اللَّهُ يَهْدِي لِلْحَقِّ ۗ أَفَمَنْ يَهْدِي
إِلَى الْحَقِّ أَحَقُّ أَنْ يُتَّبَعَ أَمْ لَا يَهْدِي إِلَّا أَنْ يُهْدَىٰ ۗ فَمَا لَكُمْ كَيْفَ تَحْكُمُونَ

'Say: Is there any of your associates who guides to the truth? Say: Allah guides to the truth. Is He then Who guides to the truth more worthy to be followed, or he who himself does not go aright unless he is guided? What then is the matter with you; how do you judge?' (Surah Yunus, Verse 35)

Amir'ul-Mu'minin 'Ali (a.s.) has described the characteristics of both kinds of Imams in his orations. 'The reality of people is not understood by their names but by the pattern of their behavior and mannerisms. Just as clothes hide the defects of the body, external manners cloak the defects of the soul. A connection of the soul is a necessity between the Imam and the follower.

If a person (i.e. Imam) is not pious in his own heart, he will not be able to guide his followers towards piety and servitude. Hence if we desire Heaven and want to safeguard our eternal life from the chastisement of the Hellfire, then we have to search for an Imam whose inner and outer selves both are complete manifestations of divine command. Such an Imam must necessarily be adorned with piety completely, i.e. must be an infallible.

We will discuss the characteristics of the Imam of Hellfire and the Imam who guides to the truth, in the light of the sermons of Hazrat 'Ali (a.s.).

The Imam of the Hellfire

'...certainly, the worst man before Allah is the oppressive Imam who has gone astray and through whom others go astray. He destroys the accepted Sunnah and revives abandoned innovations. I heard the Messenger of Allah (S) predict – On the Day of Judgment the oppressive Imam will be brought without anyone to support him or anyone to advance excuses on his behalf, and then he will be thrown into Hell, where he will rotate as the hand-mill rotates. Then eventually he will be confined to its hollow.'¹

An oppressor is not only the one who usurps the rights of others and persecutes others. The Qur'an declares,

....وَمَنْ يَتَعَدَّ حُدُودَ اللَّهِ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ

'...and whoever exceeds the limits of Allah these it is that are the unjust.' (2:229)

These include those disobedient of Allah's commands, who have violated His edicts and exceeded His limits. The Qur'an further proclaims,

....وَمَنْ لَمْ يَحْكَمْ بِمَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ

'and whoever did not judge by what Allah revealed, those are they that are the unjust.' (5:45)

If somebody makes additions to the religion or forbids an obligation, he has violated the divine command which tantamount to injustice.

Therefore, any person who has not been appointed an Imam by Allah and he claims this position for himself, he has transgressed the limits of Allah and has disregarded Allah's orders. He is a tyrannical and an oppressive leader, whose end has been described above in Hazrat 'Ali's (a.s.) sermon.

Indeed the Holy Qur'an condemns even those people as oppressors who befriend such persons:

إِوْمَنْ يَتَوَلَّوْهُمْ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ

'...and whoever makes friends with them, these are the unjust.' (60:9)

Imam of Light and Guidance

Amir'ul-Mu'minin 'Ali (a.s.) outlines the characteristics of the just and rightly guided Imam,

'You should know that among the creatures of Allah, the most distinguished person before Allah is the just Imam who has been guided (by Allah) and guides others. So, he stands by the recognized ways of the Prophet's (S) behavior (Sunnah) and destroys the innovations. The (Prophet's (S)) ways are clear and they have signs, while innovations are also clear and they too have signs.'²

In another sermon, Hazrat 'Ali (a.s.) declares,

'Certainly the Imams are the vicegerents of Allah over His creatures and they introduce Allah to His creatures. None will enter Paradise except he who recognizes them (Imams) and knows Allah, and no one will enter Hell except he who rejects them and denies Him.³

He elaborates on this further,

'O my Allah! You know that it was neither our (Ahlul Bayt) objective to seek power, nor to acquire anything from the treasures of the world. Rather we wanted to restore the signs of Your religion and to spread prosperity into Your cities so that the oppressed among Your creatures may be safe and Your forsaken commands could be established. O my Allah! I am the first who was inclined (towards Thee) and who heard and responded (to the call of Islam). No one preceded me in prayer except the Prophet (S).'

'You certainly know that he who is in charge of honor, life, booty, (enforcement of) legal commands and the leadership of the Muslims should not be a miser as his greed would aim at their wealth. Similarly he should not be ignorant as he would then mislead them with his ignorance, nor should he be rude as he would estrange them with his rudeness. He should not be unjust in distributing wealth by preferring one group to another, nor should he accept bribes while taking decisions, as he would forfeit the rights of some and decree without decisiveness, nor should he ignore the Sunnah as he would ruin the people.⁴

By referring to these brilliant sermons, it becomes abundantly clear that the leader and Imam who possesses the following characteristics can alone guide the people towards the truth.

1. He is guided.
2. He guides others towards the true path.
3. He enlivens the Sunnah.
4. He destroys innovations.
5. His recognition is the cause of deliverance for the people.
6. His rejection is the cause of eternal chastisement.
7. He does not desire worldly power and authority.
8. He does not crave for the treasures of the world.
9. He makes manifest the signs of religion.
10. He establishes peace and tranquility in Allah's cities.

11. He provides shelter to His oppressed servants.
12. He revives the forgotten commands.
13. He is not a miser.
14. He is not ignorant.
15. His traits and mannerisms are not evil and wicked.
16. He is not a coward.
17. He is not a corrupt.
18. He does not destroy the Sunnah.

Imam 'Ali (a.s.) highlights the above points in another sermon,

'Certainly, there is no obligation on the Imam except what has been devolved on him from Allah, namely to convey warnings, to exhort and advice, to revive the Sunnah, enforce penalties on those liable and issue shares to the deserving.'⁵

The Ahlul Bayt (a.s.)

If we search for the characteristics of the rightly guided Imam, we find that these traits are present only in the pure and infallible members of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.). Hazrat 'Ali (a.s.) exhorts,

'Look at the people of the Prophet's (S) family – Ahlul Bayt (a.s.). Adhere to their direction. Follow their footsteps because they will never misguide you, and never throw you into destruction. If they sit down, you too must sit down, and if they rise, you also rise. Do not go ahead of them, as you will go astray and do not lag behind them, as you will be ruined.'⁶

'Where are those people who have lied and have tormented us and have deceitfully claimed that they are 'the ones firmly rooted in knowledge' and not us? (They lie against us and covet over position) because Allah, the All-Merciful has exalted our status and has made them inferior to us. He has conferred upon us an eminence from which He prevented them from surpassing us. He allowed us entry to the transcendental sphere of divine revelation, which He denied them.

Remember that guidance could be acquired and ignorance could be dispelled through us only. Undoubtedly the Imams shall be from the Quraish, from the Bani Hashim. This divine appointment has been made for this august progeny, and none else deserves this sublime and sacred rank.'⁷

These assertive and decisive statements make it abundantly clear that the rightful possessors of Imamate and Caliphate are the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.). No one else is deserving of this honor and station. Only the Ahlul

Bayt (a.s.) can direct the people to the path of guidance and lead them to paradise. If somebody considers a person other than them as his leader, guide and Imam, he has deviated and is far from guidance.

When Imam 'Ali (a.s.) appointed Janab Muhammad Ibne Abi Bakr as governor of Egypt, he (a.s.) wrote a letter to him in which he said:

'The leader towards guidance, and the leader towards destruction, the friend and the enemy of the Messenger of Allah (S), can never be alike.'⁸

Imam 'Ali (a.s.) has tried to awaken the consciousness of man with this powerful statement. The statement appeals to the people to open their eyes and refer to their intellects and then decide with deep reflection – Are the leaders of guidance and the path bearers to paradise equal to the guides towards the hell fire and darkness? Never! Awaken and decide for yourselves.

Chain of guidance

It is crystal clear that Imamah is the exclusive right of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.) and anyone who claims this right for himself/themselves is a liar and an oppressor. There is a well-known tradition from the Holy Prophet (S) widely narrated by all scholars and traditionalists in their books. The Holy Prophet (S) prophesied,

'This nation will have twelve leaders and guides and all of them will be from the Quraish. The one who leaves them will not harm them.' (i.e. the one who has distanced himself will be among the losers, because his death will be that of ignorance).⁹

The tradition of the Holy Prophet (S) clearly highlights that there will only be twelve Imams till the Day of Judgment and all these leaders will be from the tribe of Quraish. Within the Quraish, the Imams will be from Bani Hashim. From the traditions mentioned above we conclude that after the demise of the Holy Prophet (S) till the Day of Resurrection, this nation will have twelve Imams and all of them will be from Bani Hashim.

Regarding the tradition from the Holy Prophet (S) –

'I leave among you two weighty things (Saqalain), the Book of Allah and my progeny',

Imam 'Ali (a.s.) was asked – Who is the progeny? He (a.s.) replied:

I, Hasan (a.s.), Husayn (a.s.) and the nine Imams (a.s.) from the progeny of Husayn (a.s.), of whom the ninth one will be the Mahdi (a.t.f.s.) and the Qa'im (a.t.f.s.). Neither will they separate from the Book of Allah nor will the Book of Allah separate from them, till they meet the Messenger of Allah (S) at the Pool of Kausar.'¹⁰

Aamir bin Kasir asked Imam 'Ali (a.s.): O Amir'ul-Mu'minin (a.s.)! You have made us aware of the guides of disbelief and the caliphs of evil, now introduce to us the guides of truth and the real guides after you.' Imam 'Ali (a.s.) informed him,

'Yes, surely it is the promise of the Holy Prophet (S) to me that this religion will have twelve Imams and leaders, nine of whom will be from the progeny of Husayn (a.s.). The Messenger of Allah (S) has narrated, 'When I went to the heavens for Meraj, I saw written on the pillar of the Arsh

'There is no god except Allah, Muhammad (S) is His Messenger, and I have aided him through 'Ali (a.s.) and I have helped him through 'Ali (a.s.)'

And I saw twelve Lights. I asked:

O My Lord! Whose lights are these?

The reply was –

These lights are of Imams from your progeny.

Then I ('Ali (a.s.)) asked:

O Messenger of Allah, will you not tell me their names?'

The Holy Prophet replied,

'Yes, certainly. You are Imam and Caliph after me, you will repay my debts and fulfill my promises. After you will be your two sons, Hasan (a.s.) and Husayn (a.s.), and after Husayn (a.s.) will be his son 'Ali – Zainul Abedeen (a.s.), after 'Ali (a.s.) will be his son Muhammad (a.s.) whose title is Baqir. After Muhammad (a.s.) will follow his son Ja'far (a.s.) whose title is Sadiq. After Ja'far (a.s.), will be his son Musa (a.s.) whose title is Kadhim. After Musa (a.s.), will be his son 'Ali (a.s.) whose title is Ridha'. After 'Ali, his son Muhammad (a.s.) will succeed him and his title is Zaki.

After Muhammad (a.s.) will follow his son 'Ali (a.s.) whose title is Naqi. After 'Ali (a.s.) will come his son Hasan (a.s.) whose title is Ameen and Askari. After him will be the son of Hasan (a.s.), Qa'im (a.t.f.s.), whose name will be my name and who will bear maximum similarity with me. He will fill the earth with justice and equity as it would have been filled with oppression and injustice.'¹¹

There isn't just one tradition like this. We find several traditions on these lines and the number goes up to 20. For instance, Imam 'Ali (a.s.) recounts from the Holy Prophet (S) who has categorically stated that from the time of his (S) death till the Day of Qiyamat there will only be twelve Imams, and then each has been mentioned by his name.

The entire arrangement was made so that people would know that Allah and His Prophet (S) had already selected the Imams. It was not that anyone could be an Imam according to the wishes of the

Islamic nation. It was not that an Imam who was supposed to follow his father in the chain of Imamah, died in his father's lifetime, leaving the chain of Imamah suspended until the people appointed the deceased's son as the Imam in his place.

All the above traditions, were narrated when Janabe Ismail ibn Ja'far as-Sadiq was not even born. The list of Imams (a.s.) narrated by the Holy Prophet (S) and Imam 'Ali (a.s.) does not show Janabe Ismail's name. Therefore, if he was never destined to be an Imam then where does the question of usurping his Imamah arise?

Another thing that is evident is that the twelve Imams (a.s.) enumerated in the prophetic tradition mentions the first Imam as Imam 'Ali (a.s.) and the twelfth and last Imam as Hazrat Wali-e-Asr (a.t.f.s.), who is the Imam of our time and is alive on this earth today and is amongst us but we are deprived of his meeting due to our sins and disobedience.

Asbagh bin Nubata (r.a.) a very reliable companion of Hazrat 'Ali (a.s.) narrates, 'I presented myself before Hazrat 'Ali (a.s.). I saw that he was engrossed in some thought and marking with his blessed finger on the earth. I queried, 'O Amir'ul-Mu'minin (a.s.)! What is the matter, I find you today in some perplexity, making signs on the earth, do you love this earth? He (a.s.) replied:

I swear by Allah that it is not so. I have never befriended this world, rather I was reflecting about that son, the eleventh one from my progeny. He is the Mahdi (a.t.f.s.), who will fill the earth with justice and equity as it was filled with injustice and tyranny. There is an occultation for him in which some people will be deviated while others will be guided. 12

How clearly Hazrat 'Ali (a.s.) has described and illuminated the chain of guidance and Imamah. Who could be more unfortunate and wretched that despite such a clear and illumined chain of guidance and Imamah, rejects it for those deviated guides who have usurped Hazrat 'Ali's (a.s.) right? Those who have harassed and persecuted Janabe Zahra (s.a.), burned down her door and waged war against her husband – the rightful Imam and celebrated on his martyrdom and were the main protagonists of the incident of Karbala.

Their sons killed Imam Husayn (a.s.) in Karbala, they made captives the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.) and martyred them one after the other. Their lives were devoid of Islamic teachings, they opposed the Qur'anic commands secretly and publicly, they were steeped in sins and prohibited acts and abandoned the religious obligations completely. They were prisoners of their carnal desires and neglected the hereafter and in this manner deprived themselves of guidance. Then how was it possible for them to guide others?

Guidance has only one path and that path is the way of Hazrat 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib (a.s.), finally terminating in Imam Mahdi (a.t.f.s.) who is the Imam today. There is no other path leading to true guidance and there is no other guarantee for success and happiness in the world and the hereafter.

We end this discussion with the declaration of Hazrat 'Ali (a.s.) inviting everyone to leave aside

prejudices and rise above personal interests, to purify the intellect and consciousness, to decide about one's own end, lest the coming of the Angel of Death finds us perplexed and uncertain. Today there is time and tomorrow could be too late. Our decision will take us either to Paradise or to Hell. Let us not spoil our hereafter for this fleeting world.

'Observe this world, which you desire, towards which you move with desire and proximity, which sometimes angers you and at other times makes you happy. It is neither your actual abode nor the station for which you were created, nor is it the place towards which you are invited.'

'Take lesson, for it is not going to remain for you, nor are you in it forever. If it has beguiled you with its charm then it has also made you fearful with its wickedness. Do not be influenced by its scare and do not seek it greedily out of its fear.'

'Advance towards that abode towards which you have been invited and turn your hearts away from this world. None of you should lament like maids on deprivation of a thing of this world. Be patient on the obedience of Allah and wish for the completion of the bounties by safeguarding that which has been commanded by our Book to be safeguarded.'

'Pay heed, if you have safeguarded your religious beliefs then loss of anything of this world will not harm you. And if you have wasted and destroyed your religion then none of the worldly things, which you have safeguarded, can bring you any benefit.'¹³

May Allah turn our hearts towards truth and give us the blessing of patience!

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1. Nahjul Balaghahh, Sermon 164, vol. 1, pg. 608–609, Ansariyan Publications.
 2. Nahjul Balaghahh, Sermon 164, vol. 1, pg. 608, Ansariyan Publications.
 3. Nahjul Balaghahh, Sermon 152, vol. 1, pg. 554, Ansariyan Publications.
 4. Nahjul Balaghahh, Sermon 131, vol. 1, pg. 496, Ansariyan Publications.
 5. Nahjul Balaghahh, Sermon 105, vol. 1, pg. 400, Ansariyan Publications.
 6. Nahjul Balaghahh, Sermon 97, vol. 1, pg. 378, Ansariyan Publications.
 7. Nahjul Balaghahh, Sermon 144, vol. 1, pg. 528, Ansariyan Publications.
 8. Nahjul Balaghahh, Letter No. 27, vol. 2, pg. 314, Ansariyan Publications.
 9. Musnad Ahmad ibn. Hanbal, vol.5, pg. 312.
 10. Kamaluddin, vol.1, pg. 240–241.
 11. Vol. 1, pg. 138, Imam 'Ali (a.s.) narrated about the condition of Imam Mahdi (a.t.f.s.).
 12. Kamaluddin, vol.1, pg. 288–297, A'laamul Wara, pg. 400
 13. Nahjul Balagah, Sermon 173, vol. 1, pg. 644, Ansariyan Publications.

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