

Question 36: The names of the Imams in the Qur'an

Question: Why aren't the names of the Imams expressly mentioned in the Qur'an?

Brief Answer

It must be noted that although the names of the pure Imams (ع) are not specified in the Qur'an, the Prophet (ص) did assert their names, especially the name of Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع). A very clear instance of such assertion occurs in hadith Ghadir, which is considered the official announcement of the caliphate of Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع). Regarding the question of transmission, this hadith is *mutawatir* [i.e. it has been narrated through so many lines of transmission that it can be accepted without doubt.] and its content reveals clear evidence for the Imamate of Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع).

Moreover, there are several verses in the Qur'an that pertain to the status of Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع), the most important of which is verse 55 of Surat al-Ma'idah;

"Your guardian is only Allah, His Apostle, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the zakat while bowing down."

In books of exegesis and history, both among the Shi'ite and Sunni sources, it has been pointed out that this verse was revealed after the event in which Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) gave his ring to a poor beggar as charity while he was bowing down in prayer, and so this verse refers to no other than Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع). Thus, although Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) has not been mentioned in the Qur'an by name, there are evident references to him.

But as to why the Imams (ع) have not been mentioned by name, at least two answers could be propounded.

Firstly, the normal pattern of the Qur'an is to deal with issues in a general tone, providing the general principles and rules, without getting into the explanation of the minute details. This is the method the

Qur`an takes up in many instances and it is for this reason that when Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad as-Sadiq (ع) was asked about this question, he replied that, "It is the same case with the daily prayer, the zakat, and hajj: Allah has mentioned only their general rules in the Qur`an but has not elucidated the details. It was the Prophet (ص) who expressed the precise method of carrying out such duties and their related details. In the same vein, regarding the question of succession, the Prophet (ص) himself specified the names of 'Ali and his household (ع) as his successors and so there was no need for their names to have been expressed in the Qur`an itself.

Secondly, in such an issue, where there was a good chance of opposition, prudence necessitated that the Qur`an mention the issue indirectly and through allusions for there was the possibility that opposition to the issue of Imamate might lead to opposition to the Qur`an and the main core of Islam, which was certainly not in the interest of the Muslims. That is, if there were a verse specifying the succession of 'Ali (ع), the opponents would have distorted it out of their opposition to him, and this would have violated the value of Islam and the Qur`an as the final religion and the eternal and divine book. For, it should be borne in mind that one of the ways by which the Qur`an could be preserved—for Allah (awj) has asserted,

"Indeed We have sent down the Reminder [i.e. the Qur`an] and indeed We will preserve it."¹

is to remove the natural motives for opposition and distortion.

Hence, the Qur`an, firstly, refrains from expressing the names of the Imams (ع); and secondly, places the verses that are related to the question of Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) successorship, the Verse of Tabligh (which regards the official announcement of Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib's (ع) successorship), and the Verse of Tathir (which regards the infallibility of the Prophet's household) between other apparently unrelated verses so as to diminish, as much as possible, the motives for distortion and in so doing secure the Qur`an against all possible attacks.

Detailed Answer

To begin with, the reader's attention should be drawn to the fact that the names of the Imams (ع) were mentioned expressly by the Prophet (ص), especially the blessed name of Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع), whose successorship was affirmed by the Prophet (ص) on several occasions.

One occasion was at the beginning of the Prophet's (ص) mission when he embarked on spreading his message to his clan and family, saying, "The first [of you] to believe in me will be my spiritual heir (*wasī*), my vizier, and my successor." To this offer no one gave a positive answer except for Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع), and so finally the Prophet (ص) said, "After me, you will be my spiritual heir, my vizier, and my successor."²

Another occasion was the event at Ghadir Khum in which he expressly said, "Whomever I am his

master, then ‘Ali (ع) is also his master.”³

Another of such assertions appears in the hadith of Manzilat in which the Prophet (ص) is related as having told Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع), “You are to me what Harun was to Musa, except that there will be no prophet coming after me.”⁴

It should be noted that the related sayings of the Prophet (ص) regarding the successorship of Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) are too numerous to be impugned, and this point has been alluded to in many Sunni and Shi’ite books.⁵

In another hadith, the Prophet (ص) is recorded to have specifically mentioned the names of all the Imams—starting with Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) and up to Imam Mahdi (ع) — to Jabir b. ‘Abdullah Ansari.⁶

Thus this fact must be kept in mind that although the names of the Imams (ع) do not appear in the Qur’an, but the Prophet (ص) — whose sayings are, according to the Qur’an, all true and are essentially revelations⁷—did specify their names and reiterated their successorship and leadership.

Furthermore, in the Qur’an there is an allusion to the Commander of the Faithful’ position of leadership, and although his name has not been mentioned there, nevertheless, the majority of the exegetes, whether Shi’ite or Sunni, admit that the allusion refers to ‘Ali’s (ع) status, and as such applies to no other than him.⁸ The verse in which that allusion occurs is verse 55 of Surat al-Ma’idah, which reads,

“Your guardian is only Allah, His Apostle, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the zakat while bowing down.”⁹

Considering that in Islam there is no such rule that the Muslim should give zakat while bowing down in prayer, it becomes evident that this verse is referring to an incident that really took place. That incident took place on the day when Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) was performing the ritual bow in the prayer, a beggar came up to him and asked him for some help. In response, Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) pointed to his ring, and so the beggar took the ring off of his finger and left.

According to the reading derived from the aforementioned historical incident, the verse asserts that the leadership of the Muslims is “only” in the hands of Allah (awj), his Apostle, and Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع), and no other but them enjoys that status.

Hence, up to this point, it has been clarified that the names of the Imams (ع) were expressly mentioned by the Prophet (ص) and that there is an unmistakable allusion in the Qur’an to the Commander of the Faithful’ position of leadership. These points are such that if an impartial person intends to clarify the truth for himself, he will, with only a little amount of research, realize that the Prophet’s (ص) opinion regarding the question of successorship and leadership was in favour of Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) and his pure sons.

But as to why their names are not specifically mentioned in the Qur`an, two justifications could be proposed.

First, the normal procedure that the Qur`an takes up is dealing with issues in a general manner and in the form of general rules and principles without enumerating their details, such as is the case about many of the fundamental and minor principles mentioned in the Qur`an. This answer has been suggested in a hadith narrated from Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad as-Sadiq (ع), and according to the narration, the Imam (ع) corroborates his answer by providing three examples.

1. One is how the issue of the ritual prayer is dealt with in the Qur`an. The Qur`an's mention of the prayer is only a general description without elucidating the quality [i.e. the method] or quantity [i.e. how many times each act must be repeated during the course of a prayer] of every prayer. But the Prophet (ص) explained to the Muslims the manner in which the prayer should be performed and the number of the *raka'at* [pl. of *rak'ah*, the most general part of the ritual prayer, consisting of recitation of parts of the Qur`an while erect, then bowing, thereafter standing up and from there going down for prostration, after which one sits up and then again falls in prostration before Allah (ع)].
2. Another example that the Imam (ع) cited was the issue of zakat, which has been introduced in the Qur`an in a general manner, and it was the Prophet (ص) who determined the items to which zakat pertained and the amounts with which the zakat of each item is identified.
3. His third example was the issue of hajj, about which the Qur`an only expresses its obligatory nature, while it was the Prophet (ص) who personally demonstrated to the Muslims the method by which this ritual should be carried out.¹⁰

Thus, it is unreasonable to expect that the Qur`an should examine the details of all religious issues. And so it is with regards to the issue of the leadership of the Prophet's household (ع), the fact that the names of the Imams (ع) have not been specified should not be cited as grounds for rejecting the school of the Ahlul Bayt (ع) (the household of the Prophet), just as one should not curtail the noon prayer from four rak'ats to two rak'ats, for instance, with the excuse that the Qur`an does not specify that it should be four rak'ats, or just as one should not refrain from performing the ritual cycles around the Ka'bah with the excuse that it has not been expressed in the Qur`an.

The second justification is that regarding such a controversial issue, where there existed a high risk of opposition, prudence dictated that the Qur`an mention the issue in an implicit manner, for there was the risk that opposition to the issue of the Commander of the Faithful's leadership might even jeopardize the integrity of the Qur`an itself. Thus a direct mention of the issue was certainly not in the interest of the Muslim community. For, it should be noted that one of the methods for preserving the Qur`an from any distortion, as promised by Allah (awj),

"Indeed We have sent down the Reminder, and indeed We will preserve it;"¹¹,

is precisely this: To express the issues in such a way as to eliminate any motives on the side of the pseudo-Muslim hypocrites for distortion, so that groups that do carry strong motives for distortion, out of material desires or opposition to the truth, would not alter the Qur`an to conform it to their inclinations, thereby violating the integrity of the Qur`an.

Ayatullah Mutahhari expresses this explanation in the following manner: “As to the question of why the Qur`an has not specifically mentioned the issue of ‘Ali’s (ع) successorship, they answer is as follows: Firstly, the norm of the Qur`an is to express issues in the form of general principles, and secondly, the Prophet (ص) or Allah (awj) did not want to propound this issue [i.e. the issue of the leadership of the Muslim community]—an issue that was at risk of being manipulated by men out of egocentrism and ambition—so bluntly.

For, just as they [i.e. the opponents] so readily disregarded what the Prophet (ص) had said about this issue on the basis of various excuses—including the claim to *ijtihad* [i.e. that what the Prophet (ص) said in this regard was his own personal view and we also have the right to put forward and follow our own opinions]—and so justified their position by claiming that the Prophet (ص) did not intend the leadership of ‘Ali (ع) when he said those things about him, but rather he actually meant such and such, if there were a verse in this relation, they would just as well have misinterpreted it.

The Prophet (ص) in his statements said very clearly, “This here ‘Ali (ع) is his [i.e. the Muslim’s] master.” Would you like anything more frank than this! But there is a difference between discarding a statement of the Prophet (ص), albeit so clear, and that of a verse of the Qur`an clearly mentioning the issue, especially only a day after the demise of the Prophet (ص).

It was for this reason that I related the following story in the preface to my book, *Succession and Leadership*:

During the Commander of the Faithful reign, a Jew wanted to scold the Muslim community concerning the events surrounding the Prophet’s death—and they did really deserve scolding! He told ‘Ali (ع), “You had not buried your prophet before you opposed each other regarding him.” The Commander of the Faithful retorted, “We opposed each other not regarding him but regarding a verdict that he had addressed to us. But as to you; your feet were still soaked from the sea [which Musa had miraculously split in half] when you told your prophet, ‘make for us a God like the gods that they have.’ He [i.e. Musa] said, ‘You are indeed an ignorant lot.’ So there is a big difference between what happened amongst us and what happened amongst you. We did not quarrel over the Prophet himself, but rather about what was the actual content of his command. These two are very different.”

It is very different to justify a mistake—although this justification might not be the real cause for the mistake but only a pretext for the real cause of the mistake—by saying that those who made the mistake thought their claim was in accordance with what the Prophet (ص) intended, and in so doing manipulated the Prophet’s statement—such justification is better than to say that those who made the mistake

discarded the related Qur`anic verse despite its clarity, to say that they distorted the Qur`an.

Therefore, it can be said that the main point in not specifying the names of the Imams (ع) in the Qur`an, or at least the name of the Commander of the Faithful, was securing the Qur`an against any distortion.

Thus, as can be witnessed, the Verses of *Tathir*, *Tabligh*, and *Wilayat* are inserted among the verses regarding the wives of the Prophet (ص), or the verses about the rules pertaining to the People of the Book and those explaining that Muslims should not make friends with them [i.e. the People of the Book], which apparently have no bearing on the issue of the leadership of the pure Imams (ع) and Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع). Thus an impartial researcher can, with the slightest attention realize that the tone of the part of the verse pertaining to the issue in question diverges from the main body of the verse and that it has been placed there for a certain reason [namely, concealment].

1. Surat al-Hijr (15), Verse 9:

﴿ إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَفِظُونَ ﴾

2. al-'Umdah, pg. 121,133; Ghayat al-Maram, pg. 320; al-Ghadir, vol. 2 pp. 278-279:

فَأَخَذَ بِرُفْيَتِي ثُمَّ قَالَ: إِنَّ هَذَا أَخِي وَوَصِيِّي وَخَلِيفَتِي فَيُكِّمُ فَاَسْمَعُوا لَهُ وَأَطِيعُوا

3. This hadith is mutawatir and exists in both Shi'ah and Sunni books. 'Allamah Amini, in his book al-Ghadir (vol. 1 pg. 114), has gathered the narrators of this hadith from all sources and put them in chronological order. At the top of this list are 60 of the Noble Prophet's companions which Sunni books use as narrators. In his book 'Abaqat, Mir Hamid Husayn has also proven this hadith to be mutawatir. (refer to: Ibn al-Maghazili, Manaqib, pp. 25-26)

4. al-'Umdah, pg. 173-175; Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal, vol. 3 pg. 32; al-Ghadir, vol. 1, pg. 51, also vol. 3, pg. 197-201

فَقَالَ لَهُ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: أَمَا تَرْضَى أَنْ تَكُونَ مِنِّي بِمَنْزِلَةِ هَارُونَ مِنْ مُوسَى إِلَّا أَنَّهُ لَا نَبِيَّ بَعْدِي؟

5. 'Allamah Amini and Mir Hamid Husayn have put forth much effort in proving the tawatur of hadith's on the Imamate of Imam 'Ali (ع). Fadil Quchani, a Sunni scholar who has rejected the tawatur of some of these hadith's, has accepted the tawatur of some others.

6. Yanabi' al-Mawaddah, vol. 3, pg. 398-399:

سَمِعْتُ جَابِرَ بْنَ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ الْأَنْصَارِيَّ يَقُولُ: قَالَ لِي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ (ص): يَا جَابِرُ إِنَّ أَوْصِيَاءِي وَأَيْمَةَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ مِنْ بَعْدِي أَوْلَاهُمْ عَلِيٌّ، ثُمَّ الْحَسَنُ، ثُمَّ الْحُسَيْنُ، ثُمَّ عَلِيُّ بْنُ الْحُسَيْنِ، ثُمَّ مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ عَلِيٍّ الْمَعْرُوفُ بِالْبَاقِرِ سُنْدَرِكُهُ يَا جَابِرُ فَإِذَا لَقَيْتَهُ فَأَقْرَأْهُ مِنِّي السَّلَامَ، ثُمَّ جَعْفَرُ بْنُ مُحَمَّدٍ، ثُمَّ مُوسَى بْنُ جَعْفَرٍ، ثُمَّ عَلِيُّ بْنُ مُوسَى، ثُمَّ مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ عَلِيٍّ، ثُمَّ عَلِيُّ بْنُ مُحَمَّدٍ، ثُمَّ الْحَسَنُ بْنُ عَلِيٍّ، ثُمَّ الْقَائِمُ اسْمُهُ إِسْمَاعِيلُ وَكُنْيَتُهُ كُنْيَتِي مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ الْحَسَنِ بْنِ عَلِيٍّ، ذَلِكَ الَّذِي يَفْتَحُ اللَّهُ - تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى - عَلَى يَدَيْهِ مَشَارِقَ الْأَرْضِ وَمَغَارِبَهَا، ذَلِكَ الَّذِي يَغِيبُ عَنْ أَوْلِيَائِهِ غَيْبَةً لَا يُنْبِتُ عَلَى الْقَوْلِ بِإِمَامَتِهِ إِلَّا مَنْ أَمْتَحَنَ اللَّهُ قَلْبَهُ لِلْإِيمَانِ.

7. Surat al-Najm (53), Verses 3-4:

﴿ وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ، إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ ﴾

8. Refer to tafsir books under verse 55 of Surat al-Ma'idah such as: al-Tafsir al-Kabir by Fakhr Razi; Tafsir-e-Namuneh; al-Durr al-Manthur. Some Sunni books of tradition have also mentioned this event - refer to: Dhakhayir al-'Uqba, pg. 88; Lubab al-Nuqul, pg. 90; Kanz al-'Ummal, vol. 6 pg. 391. A list of books containing other books can be found in Tafsir-e-Nemuneh, vol. 4, pg. 425.

9. Surat al-Ma'idah (5), Verse 55:

﴿ إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ يُبَيِّمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَهُمْ رَاكِعُونَ ﴾

10. al-Kafi, vol. 1, pg. 286-287:

عَنْ أَبِي بصيرٍ قَالَ سَأَلْتُ أَبَا عَبْدِ اللَّهِ (ع) عَنْ قَوْلِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ: ﴿ أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ ﴾ فَقَالَ: نَزَلَتْ فِي عَلِيٍّ بْنِ أَبِي طَالِبٍ وَالْحَسَنِ وَالْحُسَيْنِ عَلَيْهِمُ السَّلَامُ. فَقُلْتُ لَهُ: إِنَّ النَّاسَ يَقُولُونَ: فَمَا لَهُ لَمْ يَسْمَعْ عَلِيًّا وَأَهْلَ بَيْتِهِ عَلَيْهِمُ السَّلَامُ فِي كِتَابِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ؟ قَالَ: فَقَالَ: قُولُوا لَهُمْ: إِنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ (ص) نَزَلَتْ عَلَيْهِ الصَّلَاةُ وَلَمْ يَسْمَعْ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ ثَلَاثًا وَلَا أَرْبَعًا، حَتَّى كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ (ص) هُوَ الَّذِي فَسَّرَ ذَلِكَ لَهُمْ، وَنَزَلَتْ عَلَيْهِ الزَّكَاةُ وَلَمْ يَسْمَعْ لَهُمْ مِنْ كُلِّ أَرْبَعِينَ دَرَاهِمًا دَرَاهِمًا، حَتَّى كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ (ص) هُوَ الَّذِي فَسَّرَ ذَلِكَ لَهُمْ، وَنَزَلَ الْحَجُّ فَلَمْ يَقُلْ لَهُمْ: طُوفُوا أَسْبُوعًا حَتَّى كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ (ص) هُوَ الَّذِي فَسَّرَ ذَلِكَ لَهُمْ.

11. Surat al-Hijr (15), Verse 9:

﴿ إِنَّا نَحْنُ نُزَلِّلْنَا الذُّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ ﴾

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