



Imamate and Twelve Imams

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The Meaning of Imam

Imam or leader is the title given to a person who takes the lead in a community in a particular social movement or political ideology or scientific or religious form of thought. Naturally, because of his relation to the people he leads, he must conform his actions to their capabilities in both important and secondary matters.

As is clear from the preceding chapters, the sacred religion of Islam takes into consideration and gives directives concerning all aspects of the life of all men. It investigates human life from the spiritual point of view and guides man accordingly, and it intervenes on the plane of formal and material existence from the point of view of the life of the individual. In the same way it intervenes on the plane of social life and its regulation (i.e., on the plane of government).

Thus the imamate and religious leadership in Islam may be studied from three different perspectives: from the perspective of Islamic government, of Islamic sciences and injunctions, and of leadership and innovative guidance in the spiritual life. Shi'ism believes that since Islamic society is in dire need of guidance in each of these three aspects, the person who occupies the function of giving that guidance and is the leader of the community in these areas of religious concern must be appointed by God and the Prophet. Naturally, the Prophet himself was also appointed by Divine Command.

The Imamate and Succession

Man through his God-given nature realizes without any doubt that no organized society, such as a country or city or village or tribe or even a household consisting of a few human beings, can continue to subsist without a leader and ruler who puts the wheel of the society in motion and whose will govern each individual's will and induces the members of that society to perform their social duty. Without such a ruler the parts of this society become dispersed in a short time and disorder and confusion reign. Therefore, he who is the ruler and governor of a society, whether it

be great or small, if he is interested in his own position and the continued existence of his society, will appoint a successor for himself if he is to be absent from his function temporarily or permanently. He will never abandon the domain of his rule and be oblivious to its existence or annihilation. The head of a household who bids farewell to his house and household for a journey of a few days or months will appoint one of the members of the household or someone else as his successor and will leave the affairs of the house in his hands. The head of an institution, or the principle of a school, or the owner of a shop, if he is to be absent even for a few hours will select someone to represent him.

In the same way Islam is a religion which according to the text of the Holy Book and the Sunnah is established upon the basis of the primordial nature of things. It is a religion concerned with social life, as has been seen by every observer near and far. The special attention God and the Prophet have given to the social nature of this religion can never be denied or neglected. It is an incomparable feature of Islam. The Holy Prophet was never oblivious to the problem of the formation of social groupings wherever the influence of Islam penetrated. Whenever a city or village fell into Muslim hands he would, in the shortest time possible, appoint a governor or ruler in whose hands he would leave the affairs of the Muslims. In very important military expeditions ordered for the Holy War (jihad), he would appoint more than one leader and commander, in order of succession. In the war of Mu'tah he even appointed four leaders, so that if the first were to be killed the second would be recognized as the head and his command accepted and if the second were to be killed, then the third, and so on.

The Prophet also displayed great interest in the problem of succession and never failed to appoint a successor when necessary. Whenever he left Medina he would appoint a governor in his own place. Even when he migrated from Mecca to Medina and there was as yet no idea as to what would occur, in order to have his personal affairs managed in Mecca for those few days and to give back to people what had been entrusted to him, he appointed Ali - may peace be upon him - as his successor. In the same way, after his death Ali was his successor in matters concerning his debts and personal affairs. The Shi'ites claim that for this very reason it is not conceivable that the Prophet should have died without appointing someone as his successor, without having selected a guide and leader to direct the affairs of Muslims and to turn the wheels of Islamic society.

Man's primordial nature does not doubt the importance and value of the fact that the creation of a society depends on a set of common regulations and customs which are accepted in practice by the majority of the groups in that society, and that the existence and continuation of that society depend upon a just government which agrees to carry out these regulations completely. Any one who possesses intelligence does not neglect or forget this fact. At the same time one can doubt neither the breadth and detailed nature of the Islamic Shari'ah, nor the importance and value the Prophet considered it to possess, so that he made many sacrifices for its application and preservation. Nor can one debate about the mental genius, perfection of intelligence, perspicacity

of vision or power of deliberation of the Prophet (beside the fact that this is affirmed through revelation and prophecy).

According to established traditions in both Sunni and Shi'ite collections of hadith (in the chapter on temptations and seditions and others) transmitted from the Prophet, the Prophet foretold seditions and tribulations which would entangle Islamic society after his death, and the forms of corruption which would penetrate the body of Islam, and later worldly rulers who would sacrifice this pure religion for their own impure, unscrupulous ends. How is it possible that the Prophet should not neglect to speak of the details of events and trials of years or even thousands of years after him, and yet would neglect the condition that had to be brought into being most urgently after his death? Or that he should be negligent and consider as unimportant a duty that is on the one hand simple and evident and on the other significant to such a degree? How could he concern himself with the most natural and common acts such as eating, drinking and sleeping and give hundreds of commands concerning them, yet remain completely silent about this important problem and not appoint someone in his own place?

Even if we accepted the hypothesis (which Shi'ism does not accept) that the appointment of the ruler of Islamic society is given by the Shari'ah to the people themselves, still it would be necessary for the Prophet to give an explanation concerning this matter. He would have had to give the necessary instructions to the community so that they would be aware of the problem upon which the existence and growth of Islamic society and the life of religious symbols and observances depended and relied. Yet there is no trace of such a prophetic explanation or religious instruction. If there had been such a thing, those who succeeded the Prophet and held the reins of power in their hands would not have opposed it. Actually, the first caliph transferred the caliphate to the second caliph by bequest. The second caliph chose the third caliph through a six-man council of which he was himself determined and ordered. Mu'awiyah forced Imam Hasan to make peace and in this way carried away the caliphate. After this even the caliphate was converted into a hereditary monarchy. Gradually many religious observances identified with the early years of Islamic rule (such as holy war, commanding what is lawful and prohibiting what is forbidden, the establishment of boundaries for human action) were weakened or even disappeared from the political life of the community, nullifying in this domain the efforts of the Prophet of Islam.

Shi'ism has studied and investigated the primordial nature of man and the continuous tradition of wisdom that has survived among men. It has penetrated into the principal purpose of Islam which is to revivify man's primordial nature, and has investigated such things as the methods used by the Prophet in guiding the community ; the troubles which entangled Islam and the Muslims and which led to division and separation ; and the short life of the Muslim governments of the early centuries, which were characterized by negligence and lack of strict religious principles. As a result of these studies Shi'ism has reached the conclusion that there are sufficient traditional texts left

by the Prophet to indicate the procedure for determining the Imam and successor of the Prophet. This conclusion is supported by Quranic verses and hadiths of Ghadir, Safinah, Thaqalayn, Haqq, Manzilah, Da'wat-i 'ashirah-i aqrabin and others. But of course these hadiths, most of which are also accepted by Sunnism, have not been understood in the same way by Shi'ism and Sunnism. Otherwise the whole question of succession would not have arisen. Whereas these hadiths appear to Shi'ites as a clear indication of the Prophet's intention in the question of succession, they have been interpreted by Sunnis in quite another way so as to leave this question open and unanswered.

To prove the caliphate of Ali ibn Abi Talib, Shi'ites have had recourse to Quranic verses, including the following: "Your friend [wali] can be only Allah; and His messenger and those who believe, who establish worship and pay the poor-due, and bow down (in prayer) [or, and this reading is accepted by 'Allamah Tabataba'i: "...pay the poor-due while bowing down (in prayer)"]" (Quran, V, 55). Shi'ite and Sunni commentators alike agree that this verse was revealed concerning Ali ibn Abi Talib, and many Shi'ite and Sunni traditions exist supporting this view. Abu Dharr Ghifari has said: "One day we prayed the noontime prayers with the Prophet. A person in need asked people to help but no one gave him anything, 'Oh God! Be witness that in the mosque of the Prophet no one gave me anything.' Ali ibn Abi Talib was in the position of genuflection in the prayers. He pointed with his finger to the person, who took his ring and left. The Prophet, who was observing the scene raised his head toward heaven and said: 'Oh God! My brother Moses said to Thee, "Expand my breast and make easy my tasks and make my tongue eloquent so that they will comprehend my words, and make my brother, Harun, my help and vizier" [cf. Quran, XXVIII, 35]. Oh God! I am also Thy prophet ; expand my breast and make easy my tasks and make Ali my vizier and helper.'" Abu Dharr says, "The words of the Prophet had not as yet finished when the verse [cited above] was revealed."

Another verse which the Shi'ites consider as proof of the caliphate of Ali is this: "This day are those who disbelieve in despair of (even harming) your religion ; so fear them not, fear Me! This day have I perfected your religion for you and completed My favour unto you, and have chosen for you as religion AL-ISLAM" (Quran, V, 3). The obvious meaning of this verse is that before that particular day the infidels had hopes that a day would come when Islam would die out, but God through the actualization of a particular even made them lose forever the hope that Islam would be destroyed. This very event was the cause of the strength and perfection of Islam and of necessity could not be a minor occasion such as the promulgation of one of the injunctions of religion. Rather, it was a matter of such importance that the continuation of Islam depended upon it.

This verse seems to be related to another verse which comes toward the end of the same chapter: "O Messenger! Make known that which hath been revealed unto thee from thy Lord, for if thou do it not, thou will not have conveyed His message. Allah will protect thee from mankind."

(Quran, V, 67). This verse indicates that God commanded a mission of great concern and importance to the Prophet which if not accomplished would endanger the basis of Islam and prophecy. But the matter was so important that the Prophet feared opposition and interference and in awaiting suitable circumstances delayed it, until there came a definite and urgent order from God to execute this command without delay and not to fear anyone. This matter also was not just a particular religious injunction in the ordinary sense, for to preach one or several religious injunctions is not so vital that if a single one of them were not preached it would cause the destruction of Islam. Nor did the Prophet of Islam fear anyone in preaching the injunctions and laws of religion.

These indications and witnesses add weight to the Shi'ite traditions which assert that these verses were revealed at Ghadir Khumm and concern the spiritual investiture (walayat) of Ali ibn Abi Talib. Moreover, many Shi'ite and Sunni commentators have confirmed this point.

Abu Sa'id Khudari says: "The Prophet in Ghadir Khumm invited people toward Ali and took his arm and lifted it so high that the white spot in the armpit of the Prophet of God could be seen. Then this verse was revealed: 'This day have I perfected your religion for you and completed My favor unto you, and have chosen for you as religion AL-ISLAM.' Then the Prophet said, 'God is great (Allahu akbar) that religion has become perfected and that God's bounty has been completed, His satisfaction attained and the walayat of Ali achieved.' Then he added, 'For whomever I am the authority and guide Ali is also his guide and authority. Oh God! Be friendly with the friends of Ali and the enemy of his enemies. Whoever helps him, help him, and whoever leaves him, leave him.'"

In summary we can say that the enemies of Islam who did everything possible to destroy it, when they lost all hope of achieving this end, were left with only one hope. They thought that since the protector of Islam was the Prophet, after his death Islam would be left without a guide and leader and would thus definitely perish. But in Ghadir Khumm their wishes were brought to nought and the Prophet presented Ali as the guide and leader of Islam to the people. After Ali this heavy and necessary duty of guide and leader was left upon the shoulders of his family.

Some of the hadiths pertaining to Ghadir Khumm, the investiture of Ali, and the significance of the Household of the Prophet are cited here:

Hadith-i ghadir: The Prophet of Islam upon returning from the farewell pilgrimage stopped in Ghadir Khumm, assembled the Muslims and after delivering a sermon, chose Ali as the leader and guide of Muslims.

Bara' says: "I was in the company of the Prophet during the farewell pilgrimage. When we reached Ghadir Khumm he ordered that place to be cleaned. Then he took Ali's hand and placed him on his

right side. Then he said, 'Am I the authority whom you obey?' They answered, 'We obey your directions.' Then he said, 'For whomever I am his master (maula) and the authority whom he obeys, Ali will be his master. Oh God! Be friendly with the friends of Ali and enemy of the enemies of Ali.' Then Umar ibn al-Khattab said to Ali, 'May this position be pleasing to you, for now you are my master and the master of all the believers.'"

Hadith-i safinah: Ibn 'Abbas says, "The Prophet said, 'My household is like the ship of Noah ; whoever embarks upon it will be saved and whoever turns away from it will be drowned.'"

Hadith-i thaqalayn: Zayd ibn Arqam has recounted that the Prophet said, "It seems that God has called me unto Himself and I must obey His call. But I leave two great and precious things among you : the Book of God and My Household. Be careful as to how you behave toward them. These two will never be separated from each other until they encounter me at Kawthar (in paradise)." Hadith-i thaqalayn is one of the most strongly established hadiths, and has been transmitted through many chains of transmission and in different versions. Shi'ites and Sunnis agree concerning its authenticity. Several important points can be deduced from this hadith and its like:

(1) In the same way that the Holy Quran will remain until the Day of Judgment, the progeny of the Holy Prophet will also remain. No period of time will be without the existence of the figure which Shi'ism calls the Imam, the real leader and guide of men. (2) Through these two great trusts (amanat), the Prophet has provided for all the religious and intellectual needs of the Muslims. He has introduced his Household to Muslims as authorities in knowledge and has pronounced their words and deeds to be worthy and authoritative. (3) One must not separate the Holy Quran from the Household of the Prophet. No Muslim has a right to reject the "sciences" of the members of the Household of the Prophet and remove himself from under their direction and guidance. (4) If people obey the members of the Household and follow their words they will never be led astray.

God will always be with them. (5) The answers to the intellectual and religious needs of men are to be found in the hands of the members of the Household of the Prophet. Whoever follows them will not fall into error and will reach true felicity ; that is, the members of the Household are free from error and sin and are inerrant. From this it can be concluded that by "Members of the Household" and "progeny" is not meant all the descendants and relatives of the Prophet. Rather, specific individuals are meant who are perfect in the religious sciences and are protected against error and sin so that they are qualified to guide and lead men. For Shi'ism these individuals consist of Ali ibn Abi Talib and his eleven descendants who were chosen to the imamate one after another. This interpretation is also confirmed by the Shi'ite traditions. For example, Ibn 'Abbas has said, "I said to the Prophet, 'Who are your descendants whose love is obligatory [upon Muslims]?' He said, 'Ali, Fatimah, Hasan and Husayn.'" Jabir has transmitted that the Prophet has said, "God placed the children of all prophets in their 'backbone' but placed my children in the backbone of Ali."

Hadith-i haqq : Umm Salmah has said, "I heard from the Prophet of God who said, 'Ali is with the Truth (haqq) and the Quran, and the Truth and the Quran are also with Ali, and they will be inseparable until they come upon me at Kawthar.'"

Hadith-i manzilah : Sa'd ibn Waqqas has said, "The Prophet of God said to Ali, 'Are you not satisfied to be to me what Harun was to Moses except that after me there will not be another prophet?'"

Hadith-i da'wat-i 'ashirah : The Prophet invited his relatives for luncheon and after the meal told them, "I know of no one who has brought to his people better things than I have brought to you. God has commanded me to invite you to draw toward Him. Who is there who will assist me in this matter and be my brother and inheritor (wasi) and vicegerent (khalifah) among you?" All remained silent, but Ali, who was the youngest of all, exclaimed, "I shall be your deputy and aide." Then the Prophet put his arms around him and said, "He is my brother, inheritor and vicegerent. You must obey him." Then the group began to depart laughing and telling Abu Talib, "Muhammad has ordered you to obey your son."

Hudhayfah has said, "The Prophet of God said, 'If you make Ali my vicegerent and successor - which I do not think you will do - you will find him a perspicacious guide who will direct you toward the straight path !'"

Ibn Marduyah has said that the Prophet said, "Whoever wishes that his life and death be like mine and that he enter paradise should after me love Ali and follow my household, for they are my descendants and have been created from my clay. My knowledge and understanding have been bestowed upon them. Therefore woe unto those who deny their virtues. My intercession [on the Day of Judgment] will never include them."

Affirmation of the Previous Section

Much of the argument of Shi'ism concerning the succession to the Prophet rests on the belief that during the last days of his illness the Prophet in the presence of some of his companions asked for some paper and ink so that something could be written which, if obeyed by the Muslims, would prevent them from going astray. Some of those present considered the Prophet to be too ill to be able to dictate anything and said, "The Book of God is sufficient for us." There was so much clamor raised over this matter that the Holy Prophet told those present to leave, for in the presence of a

prophet there should not be any noise or clamor.

Considering what has been said above about hadiths concerning succession and the events that followed upon the death of the Prophet, especially the fact that Ali was not consulted in the question of selecting the Prophet's successor, Shi'ites conclude that the Holy Prophet had wanted to dictate his definitive views about the person who was to succeed him but was not able to do so.

The purpose of the utterances of some of those present seems to have been to cause confusion and prevent this final decision from being clearly announced. Their interruption of the Holy Prophet's discourse does not seem to be what it appears outwardly, that is concern with the possibility that the Prophet might utter incongruous words due to the intensity of his illness. For, first of all, throughout his illness the Holy Prophet was not heard to have uttered any meaningless or incongruous words and no such things has been transmitted concerning him. Moreover, according to the principles of Islam the Prophet is protected by God from uttering delirious or senseless words and is inerrant.

Secondly, if the words mentioned by some of those present on that occasion before the Prophet were meant to be of a serious nature there would have been no place for the next phrase, "The Book of God is sufficient for us." In order to prove that the Prophet might utter incongruous words under unusual circumstances the reason of his serious illness would have been used rather than the claim that with the Quran there was no need of the Prophet's words. For it could not be hidden from any Muslim that the very text of the Book of God considers the obedience to the Holy Prophet to be obligatory and his words to be in a sense like the Word of God. According to the text of the Holy Quran, Muslims must obey the injunctions of both God and the Prophet.

Thirdly, an incident involving illness occurred during the last days of the life of the first caliph, who in his last will and testament chose the second caliph as his successor. When Uthman was writing the will according to the order of the caliph, the caliph fainted. Yet the second caliph did not repeat the words that had been uttered in the case of the Prophet according to the hadith of "Pen and Paper." This fact has been confirmed in a hadith related by Ibn Abbas. And it has been accounted of the second caliph that he said, "Ali deserved the caliphate but the Quraysh would not have been able to bear his caliphate, for had he become caliph he would have forced the people to accept the pure truth and follow the right path. Under his caliphate they would not have been able to transgress the boundaries of justice and thus would have sought to engage in war with him."

Obviously according to religious principles one must force him who has deviated from the truth to follow the truth; one must not abandon the truth for the sake of one who has abandoned it. When the first caliph was informed that some of the Muslim tribes had refused to pay religious

tax, he ordered war and said, "If they do not give me the tithes which they gave to the Prophet, I shall fight against them." Eventually by this saying he meant most of all that truth and justice must be revived at all costs. Surely the problem of the legitimate caliphate was more important and significant than tithes, and Shi'ism believes that the same principle applied by the first caliph to this matter should have been applied by the whole early community to the problem of succession to the Holy Prophet.

The Imamate and Its Role in the Exposition of the Divine Sciences

In the discussion of prophecy it was mentioned that, according to the immutable and necessary law of general guidance, each created species is guided through the path of genesis and generation toward the perfection and felicity of its own kind. The human species is not an exception to this general law. Man must be guided through the very "instinct" of seeking reality and through thought concerning his life in society in such a way that this well-being in this world and the next is guaranteed. In other words, to attain human happiness and perfection, man must accept a series of doctrines and practical duties and base his life upon them.

It has, moreover, already been said that the way to understand that total program for life called religion is not through reason but through revelation and prophecy, which manifests itself in certain pure beings among mankind who are called prophets. It is the prophets who receive from God, through revelation, the knowledge of men's duties and obligations as human beings and who make these known to men, so that by fulfilling them men may attain felicity.

It is evident that in the same way that this reasoning proves the necessity for knowledge to guide men to the attainment of happiness and perfection, it also proves the necessity for the existence of individuals who preserve intact the total body of that knowledge and who instruct the people when necessary. Just as the Divine Compassion necessitates the existence of persons who come to know the duties of mankind through revelation, so also it makes it necessary that these human duties and actions of celestial origin remain forever preserved in the world and as the need arises be presented and explained to mankind. In other words, there must always be individuals who preserve God's religion and expound it when necessary.

The person who bears the duty of guarding and preserving the Divine message after it is revealed and is chosen by God for this function is called the Imam, in the same way that the person who bears the prophetic spirit and has the function of receiving Divine injunctions and laws from God is called the Prophet. It is possible for the imamate and prophecy (nubuwwat) either to be joined

in one person or to be separate.

The proof given previously to demonstrate the inerrancy of prophets, also demonstrates the inerrancy of the Imams, for God must preserve His true religion intact and in such a state that it can be propagated among mankind at all times. And this is not possible without inerrancy, without Divine protection against error.

The Difference Between Prophet and Imam

The previous argument about the reception of Divine injunctions and laws by the prophets only proves the basis of prophecy, namely the receiving of Divine injunctions. The argument does not prove the persistence and continuity of prophecy, even though the very fact that these prophetic injunctions have been preserved naturally raises the idea of persistence and continuity. That is why it is not necessary for a prophet (nabi) always to be present among mankind, but the existence of the Imam, who is the guardian of Divine religion, is on the contrary a continuous necessity for human society. Human society can never be without the figure whom Shi'ism calls the Imam whether or not he is recognized and known. God, the Most Exalted, has said in His Book: "So if these disbelieve in it, We have already entrusted it to a people [i.e., the Imams] who do not disbelieve in it" (Quran, VI, 90).

As mentioned above, the functions of prophecy and imamate may be joined in one person who is then appointed to the functions of both prophet and Imam, or to both the reception of the Divine law and its preservation and explanation. And sometimes they can be separated, such as in periods during which there is no prophet living but when there is a true Imam living among men. It is obvious that the number of God's prophets is limited and the prophets have not been present in every period and age.

It is also of significance to note that in God's Book some of the prophets have been introduced as Imams such as the Prophet Abraham, about whom is said, "And (remember) when his Lord tried Abraham with (His) commands, and he fulfilled them, He said: Lo! I have appointed thee a leader [imam] for mankind. (Abraham) said: And of my offspring (will there be leaders)? He said: My covenant includeth not wrongdoers" (Quran, II, 124). And God has also said, "And We made them chiefs [imams] who guide by Our command..." (Quran, XXI, 73).

The Imamate and Its Role in the Esoteric Dimension of Religion

In the same way that the Imam is the guide and leader of men in their external actions so does he possess the function of inward and esoteric leadership and guidance. He is the guide of the caravan of humanity which is moving inwardly and esoterically toward God. In order to elucidate this truth it is necessary to turn to the following two introductory comments. First of all, without any doubt, according to Islam as well as other Divine religions the sole means of attaining real and eternal happiness or misery, felicity or wretchedness, is by means of good or evil actions which man comes to recognize through the instruction of Divine religion as well as through his own primordial and God-given nature and intelligence. Second, through the means of revelation and prophecy God has praised or condemned man's actions according to the language of human beings and the society in which they live. He has promised those who do good and obey and accept the teachings of revelation a happy eternal life in which are fulfilled all desires that accord with human perfection. And to the evildoers and in iniquitous He has given warning of a bitter perpetual life in which is experienced every form of misery and disappointment.

Without any doubt God, who stands in every way above all that we can imagine, does not, as we do, possess "thought" moulded by a particular social structure. The relations of master and servant, ruler and ruled, command and prohibition, reward and punishment, do not exist outside our social life. The Divine Order is the system of creation itself, in which the existence and appearance of everything is related solely to its creation by God according to real relations and to that alone. Furthermore, as has been mentioned in the Holy Quran and prophetic hadith, religion contains truths and verities above the common comprehension of man, which God has revealed to us in a language we can comprehend on the level of our understanding.

It can thus be concluded that there is a real relationship between good and evil actions and the kind of life that is prepared for man in eternity, a relation that determines the happiness or misery of the future life according to the Divine Will. Or in simpler words it can be said that each good or evil action brings into being a real effect within the soul of man which determines the character of his future life. Whether he understands it or not, man is like a child who is being trained. From the instructions of the teacher, the child hears nothing but do's and don'ts but does not understand the meaning of the actions he performs. Yet, when he grows up, as a result of virtuous mental and spiritual habits attained inwardly during the period of training, he is able to have a happy social life. If, however, he refuses to submit to the instructions of the teacher he will undergo nothing but misery and unhappiness. Or he is like a sick person who, when in the care of a physician, takes medicine, food and special exercises as directed by the physician and who has no other duty than to obey the instructions of his doctor. The result of this submission to his orders is the creation of harmony in his constitution which is the source of health as well as every form of physical enjoyment and pleasure. To summarize, we can say the within his outward life man possesses an inner life, a spiritual life, which is related to his deeds and actions and develops in relation to them, and that his happiness or misery in the hereafter is completely dependent upon this inner life.

The Holy Quran also confirms this explanation. In many verses it affirms the existence of another life and another spirit for the virtuous and the faithful, a life higher than this life and a spirit more illuminated than the spirit of man as we know it here and now. It asserts that man's acts have inner effects upon his soul that remain always with him. In prophetic sayings there are also many references to this point. For example, in the Hadith-i mi'raj (hadith of the nocturnal ascension) God addresses the Prophet in these words: "He who wishes to act according to My satisfaction must possess three qualities : he must exhibit thankfulness that is not mixed with ignorance, a remembrance upon which the dust of forgetfulness will not settle, and a love in which he does not prefer the love of creatures rather than My love. If he loves Me, I love him ; I will open the eye of his heart with the sight of My majesty and will not hide from him the elites of My creatures. I will confide in him in the darkness of the night and the light of the day until conversation and intercourse with creatures terminates. I will make him hear My word and the word of My angels. I will reveal to him the secret which I have veiled from My creatures. I will dress him with the robe of modesty until the creatures feel ashamed before him. He will walk upon the earth having been forgiven. I will make his heart possess consciousness and vision and I will not hide from him anything in Paradise or in the Fire. I will make known to him whatever people experience on the Day of Judgment in the way of terror and calamity."

Abu 'Abdallah - may peace be upon him - has recounted that the Prophet of God - may peace and blessings be upon him - received Harithah ibn Malik ibn al-Nu'man and asked him, "How art thou, Oh Harithah?" He said, "Oh Prophet of God, I live as a true believer." The Prophet of God said to him, "Each thing possesses its own truth. What is the truth of thy word?" He said, "Oh Prophet of God! My soul has turned away from the world. My nights are spent in a state of awakedness and my days in a state of thirst. It seems as if I am gazing at the Throne of my Lord and the account has been settled, and as if I am gazing at the people of paradise who are visiting each other in heaven, and as if I hear the cry of the people of hell in the fire." Then the Prophet of God said, "This is a servant whose heart God has illuminated."

It must also be remembered that often one of us guides another in a good or evil matter without himself carrying out his own words. In the case of the prophets and Imams, however, whose guidance and leadership is through Divine Command, such a situation never occurs. They themselves practice the religion whose leadership they have undertaken. The spiritual life toward which they guide mankind is their own spiritual life, for God will not place the guidance of others in someone's hand unless He has guided him Himself. Special Divine guidance can never be violated or infringed upon.

The following conclusions can be reached from this discussion :

(1) In each religious community the prophets and Imams are the foremost in the perfection and

realization of the spiritual and religious life they preach, for they must and do practice their own teachings and participate in the spiritual life they profess.

(2) Since they are first among men and the leaders and guides of the community, they are the most virtuous and perfect of men.

(3) The person upon whose shoulders lies the responsibility for the guidance of a community through Divine Command, in the same way that he is the guide of man's external life and acts, is also the guide for the spiritual life, and the inner dimension of human life and religious practice depends upon his guidance.

The Second Imam

Imam Hasan Mujtaba - upon whom be peace - was the second Imam. He and his brother Imam Husayn were the two sons of Amir al-mu'minin Ali and Hadrat Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet. Many times the Prophet had said, "Hasan and Husayn are my children." Because of these same words Ali would say to his other children, "You are my children and Hasan and Husayn are the children of the Prophet."

Imam Hasan was born in the year 3 A.H. in Medina and shared in the life of the Prophet for somewhat over seven years, growing up during that time under his loving care. After the death of the Prophet which was no more than three, or according to some, six months earlier than the death of Hadrat Fatimah, Hasan was placed directly under the care of his noble father. After the death of his father, through Divine Command and according to the will of his father, Imam Hasan became Imam; he also occupied the outward function of caliph for about six months, during which time he administered the affairs of the Muslims. During that time Mu'awiyah, who was a bitter enemy of Ali and his family and had fought for years with the ambition of capturing the caliphate, first on the pretext of avenging the death of the third caliph and finally with an open claim to the caliphate, marched his army into Iraq, the seat of Imam Hasan's caliphate. War ensued during which Mu'awiyah gradually subverted the generals and commanders of Imam Hasan's army with large sums of money and deceiving promises until the army rebelled against Imam Hasan. Finally, the Imam was forced to make peace and to yield the caliphate to Mu'awiyah, provided it would again return to Imam Hasan after Mu'awiyah's death and the Imam's household and partisans would be protected in every way.

In this way Mu'awiyah captured the Islamic caliphate and entered Iraq. In a public speech he

officially made null and void all the peace conditions and in every way possible placed the severest pressure upon the members of the Household of the Prophet and the Shi'ah. During all the ten years of his imamate, Imam Hasan lived in conditions of extreme hardship and under persecution, with no security even in his own house. In the year 50 A.H. he was poisoned and martyred by one of his own household who, as has been accounted by historians, had been motivated by Mu'awiyah.

In human perfection Imam Hasan was reminiscent of his father and a perfect example of his noble grandfather. In fact, as long as the Prophet was alive, he and his brother were always in the company of the Prophet who even sometimes would carry them on his shoulders. Both Sunni and Shi'ite sources have transmitted this saying of the Holy Prophet concerning Hasan and Husayn: "These two children of mine are Imams whether they stand up or sit down" (allusion to whether they occupy the external function of caliphate or not). Also there are many traditions of the Holy Prophet and Ali concerning the fact that Imam Hasan would gain the function of imamate after his noble father.

The Third Imam

Imam Husayn (Sayyid al-Shuhada', "the lord among martyrs"), the second child of Ali and Fatimah, was born in the year 4 A.H. and after the martyrdom of his brother, Imam Hasan Mujtaba, became Imam through Divine Command and his brother's will. Imam Husayn was Imam for a period of ten years, all but the last six months coinciding with the caliphate of Mu'awiyah. Imam Husayn lived under the most difficult outward conditions of suppression and persecution. This was due to the fact that, first of all, religious laws and regulations had lost much of their weight and credit, and the edicts of the Umayyad government had gained complete authority and power. Secondly, Mu'awiyah and his aides made use of every possible means to put aside and move out of the way the Household of the Prophet and the Shi'ah, and thus obliterate the name of Ali and his family.

And above all, Mu'awiyah wanted to strengthen the basis of the caliphate of his son, Yazid, who because of his lack of principles and scruples was opposed by a large group of Muslims. Therefore, in order to quell all opposition, Mu'awiyah had undertaken newer and more severe measures. By force and necessity Imam Husayn had to endure these days and to tolerate every kind of mental and spiritual agony and affliction from Mu'awiyah and his aides- until in the middle of the year 60 A.H. Mu'awiyah died and his son Yazid took his place.

Paying allegiance (bay'ah) was an old Arab practice which was carried out in important matters

such as that kingship and governorship. Those who were ruled, and especially the well-known among them, would give their hand in allegiance, agreement and obedience to their king or prince and in this way would show their support for his actions. Disagreement after allegiance was considered as disgrace and dishonor for a people and, like breaking an agreement after having signed it officially, it was considered as a definite crime. Following the example of the Holy Prophet, people believed that allegiance, when given by free will and not through force, carried authority and weight.

Mu'awiyah had asked the well-known among the people to give their allegiance to Yazid, but had not imposed this request upon Imam Husayn. He had especially told Yazid in his last will that if Husayn refused to pay allegiance he should pass over it in silence and overlook the matter, for he had understood correctly the disastrous consequences which would follow if the issue were to be pressed. But because of his egoism and recklessness, Yazid neglected his father's advice and immediately after the death of his father ordered the governor of Medina either to force a pledge of allegiance from Imam Husayn or send his head to Damascus.

After the governor of Medina informed Imam Husayn of this demand, the Imam, in order to think over the question, asked for a delay and overnight started with his family toward Mecca. He sought refuge in the sanctuary of God which in Islam is the official place of refuge and security. This event occurred toward the end of the month of Rajab and the beginning of Sha'ban of 60 A.H. For nearly four months Imam Husayn stayed in Mecca in refuge. This news spread throughout the Islamic world. On the one hand many people who were tired of the iniquities of Mu'awiyah's rule and were even more dissatisfied when Yazid became caliph, corresponded with Imam Husayn and expressed their sympathy for him. On the other hand a flood of letters began to flow, especially from Iraq and particularly the city of Kufa, inviting the Imam to go to Iraq and accept the leadership of the populace there with the aim of beginning an uprising to overcome injustice and iniquity. Naturally such a situation was dangerous for Yazid.

The stay of Imam Husayn in Mecca continued until the season for pilgrimage when Muslims from all over the world poured in groups into Mecca in order to perform the rites of the hajj. The Imam discovered that some of the followers of Yazid had entered Mecca as pilgrims (hajjis) with the mission to kill the Imam during the rites of hajj with the arms they carried under their special pilgrimage dress (ihrami).

The Imam shortened the pilgrimage rites and decided to leave. Amidst the vast crowd of people he stood up and in a short speech announced that he was setting out for Iraq. In this short speech he also declared that he would be martyred and asked Muslims to help him in attaining the goal he had in view and to offer their lives in the path of God. On the next day he set out with his family and a group of his companions for Iraq.

Imam Husayn was determined not to give his allegiance to Yazid and knew full well that he would be killed. He was aware that his death was inevitable in the face of the awesome military power of the Umayyads, supported as it was by corruption in certain sectors, spiritual decline, and lack of will power among the people, especially in Iraq. Some of the outstanding people of Mecca stood in the way of Imam Husayn and warned him of the danger of the move he was making. But he answered that he refused to pay allegiance and give his approval to a government of injustice and tyranny. He added that he knew that wherever he turned or went he would be killed. He would leave Mecca in order to preserve the respect for the house of God and not allow this respect to be destroyed by having his blood spilled there.

While on the way to Kufa and still a few days' journey away from the city, he received news that the agent of Yazid in Kufa had put to death the representative of the Imam in the city and also one of the Imam's determined supporters who was a well-known man in Kufa. Their feet had been tied and they had been dragged through streets. The city and its surroundings were placed under strict observation and countless soldiers of the enemy were awaiting him. There was no way open to him but to march ahead and to face death. It was here that the Imam expressed his definitive determination to go ahead and be martyred ; and so he continued on his journey.

Approximately seventy kilometres from Kufa, in a desert named Karbala, the Imam and his entourage were surrounded by the army of Yazid. For eight days they stayed in this spot during which the circle narrowed and the number of the enemy's army increased. Finally the Imam, with his household and a small number of companions were encircled by an army of thirty thousand soldiers. During these days the Imam fortified his position and made a final selection of his companions. At night he called his companions and during a short speech stated that there was nothing ahead but death and martyrdom. He added that since the enemy was concerned only with his person he would free them from all obligations so that anyone who wished could escape in the darkness of the night and save his life. Then he ordered the lights to be turned out and most of his companions, who had joined him for their own advantage, dispersed. Only a handful of those who loved the truth - about forty of his close aides - and some of the Banu Hashim remained.

Once again the Imam assembled those who were left and put them to a test. He addressed his companions and Hasimite relatives. Each could benefit from the darkness of the night and escape the danger. But this time the faithful companions of the Imam answered each in his own way that they would not deviate for a moment from the path of truth of which the Imam was the leader and would never leave him alone. They said they would defend his household to the last drop of their blood and as long as they could carry a sword.

On the night of the month the last challenge to choose between "allegiance or war" was made by the enemy to the Imam. The Imam asked for a delay in order to worship overnight and became

determined to enter battle on the next day.

On the tenth day of Muharram of the year 61/680 the Imam lined up before the enemy with his small band of followers, less than ninety persons consisting of forty of his companions, thirty some members of the army of the enemy that joined him during the night and day of war, and his Hashimite family of children, brothers, nephews, nieces and cousins. That day they fought from morning until their final breath, and the Imam, the young Hashimites and the companions were all martyred. Among those killed were two children of Imam Hasan, who were only thirteen and eleven years old ; and a five-year-old child and a suckling baby of Imam Husayn.

The army of the enemy, after ending the war, plundered the haram of the Imam and burned his tents. They decapitated the bodies of the martyrs, denuded them and threw them to the ground without burial. Then they moved the members of the haram, all of whom were helpless women and girls, along with the heads of the martyrs, to Kufa. Among the prisoners there were three male members: a twenty-two year old son of Imam Husayn who was very ill and unable to move, namely Ali ibn Husayn, the fourth Imam ; his four year old son, Muhammad ibn Ali, who became the fifth Imam ; and finally Hasan Muthanna, the son of the second Imam who was also the son-in-law of Imam Husayn and who, having been wounded during the war, lay among the dead. They found him near death and through the intercession of one of the generals did not cut of his head. Rather, they took him with the prisoners to Kufa and from there to Damascus before Yazid.

The event of Karbala, the capture of the women and children of the Household of the Prophet, their being taken as prisoners from town to town and the speeches made by the daughter of Ali, Zaynab, and the fourth Imam who were among the prisoners, disgraced the Umayyads. Such abuse of the Household of the Prophet annulled the propaganda which Mu'awiyah had carried out for years. The matter reached such proportions that Yazid in public disowned and condemned the actions of his agents. The event of Karbala was a major factor in the overthrow of Umayyad rule although its effect was delayed. It also strengthened the roots of Shi'ism. Among its immediate results were the revolts and rebellions combined with bloody wars which continued for twelve years. Among those who were instrumental in the death of the Imam not one was able to escape revenge and punishment.

Anyone who studies closely the history of the life of Imam Husayn and Yazid and the conditions that prevailed at that time, and analyzes this chapter of Islamic history, will have no doubt that in those circumstances there was no choice before Imam Husayn but to be killed. Swearing allegiance to Yazid would have meant publicly showing contempt for Islam, something which was not possible for the Imam, for Yazid not only showed no respect for Islam and its injunctions but also made a public demonstration of impudently treading under foot its basis and its laws. Those before him, even if they opposed religious injunctions, always did so in the guise of religion, and at least formally respected religion. They took pride on being companions of the Holy Prophet and

the other religious figures in whom people believed. From this it can be concluded that the claim of some interpreters of these events is false when they say that the two brothers, Hasan and Husayn, had two different tastes and that one chose the way of peace and the other the way of war, so that one brother made peace with Mu'awiyah although he had an army of forty thousand while the other went to war against Yazid with an army of forty. For we see that this same Imam Husayn, who refused to pay allegiance to Yazid for one day, lived for ten years under the rule of Mu'awiyah, in the same manner as his brother who also had endured for ten years under Mu'awiyah, without opposing him.

It must be said in truth that if Imam Hasan or Imam Husayn had fought Mu'awiyah they would have been killed without there being the least benefit for Islam. Their deaths would have had not effect before the righteous-appearing policy of Mu'awiyah, a competent politician who emphasized his being a companion of the Holy Prophet, the "scribe of the revelation," and "uncle of the faithful" and who used every stratagem possible to preserve a religious guise for his rule. Moreover, with his ability to set the stage to accomplish his desires he could have had them killed by their own people and then assumed a state of mourning and sought to revenge their blood, just as he sought to give the impression that he was avenging the killing of the third caliph.

The Fourth Imam

Imam Sajjad (Ali ibn Husayn entitled Zayn al-'abidin and Sajjad) was the son of the third Imam and his wife, the queen among women, the daughter of Yazdigird the king of Iran. He was the only son of Imam Husayn to survive, for his other three brothers Ali Akbar, aged twenty-five, five year old Ja'far and Ali Asghar (or 'Abdallah) who was a suckling baby were martyred during the event of Karbala. The Imam had also accompanied his father on the journey that terminated fatally in Karbala, but because of severe illness and the inability to carry arms or participate in fighting he was prevented from taking part in the holy war and being martyred. So he was sent with the womenfolk to Damascus. After spending a period in imprisonment he was sent with honor to Medina because Yazid wanted to conciliate public opinion. But for a second time, by the order of the Umayyad caliph, 'Abd al-Malik, he was chained and sent from Medina to Damascus and then again returned to Medina.

The fourth Imam, upon returning to Medina, retired from public life completely, closed the door of his house to strangers and spent his time in worship. He was in contact only with the elite among the Shi'ites such as Abu Hamzah Thumali, Abu Khalid Kabuli and the like. The elite disseminated among the Shi'ah and the religious sciences they learned from the Imam. In this way

Shi'ism spread considerably and showed its effects during the imamate of the fifth Imam. Among the works of the fourth Imam is a book called Sahifah sajjadiyah. It consists of fifty-seven prayers concerning the most sublime Divine sciences and is known as "The Psalm of the Household of the Prophet."

The fourth Imam died (according to some Shi'ite traditions poisoned by Walid ibn 'Abd al-Malik through the instigation of the Umayyad caliph Hisham) in 95/712 after thirty-five years of imamate.

The Fifth Imam

Imam Muhammad ibn Ali Baqir (the word baqir meaning he who cuts and dissects, a title given to him by the Prophet) was the son of the fourth Imam and was born in 57/675. He was present at the event of Karbala when he was four years old. After his father, through Divine Command and the decree of those who went before him, he became Imam. In the year 114/732 he died, according to some Shi'ite traditions poisoned by Ibrahim ibn Walid ibn 'Abdallah, the nephew of Hisham, the Umayyad caliph.

During the imamate of the fifth Imam, as a result of the injustice of the Umayyads, revolts and wars broke out in some corner of the Islamic world every day. Moreover, there were disputes within the Umayyad family itself which kept the caliphate busy and to a certain extent left the members of the Household of the Prophet alone. From the other side, the tragedy of Karbala and the oppression suffered by the Household of the Prophet, of which the fourth Imam was the most noteworthy embodiment, had attracted many Muslims to the Imams.

These factors combined to make it possible for people and especially the Shi'ites to go in great numbers to Medina and to come into the presence of the fifth Imam. Possibilities for disseminating truths about Islam and the sciences of the Household of the Prophet, which had never existed for the Imams before him, were presented to the fifth Imam. The proof of this fact is the innumerable traditions recounted from the fifth Imam and the large number of illustrious men of science and Shi'ite scholars who were trained by him in different Islamic sciences. These names are listed in books of biographies of famous men in Islam.

The Sixth Imam

Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad, the son of the fifth Imam, was born in 83/702. He died in 148/765 according to Shi'ite tradition, poisoned and martyred through the intrigue of the Abbasid caliph Mansur. After the death of his father he became Imam by Divine Command and decree of those who came before him.

During the imamate of the sixth Imam greater possibilities and a more favorable climate existed for him to propagate religious teachings. This came about as a result of revolts in Islamic lands, especially the uprising of the Muswaddah to overthrow the Umayyad caliphate, and the bloody wars which finally led to the fall and extinction of the Umayyads. The greater opportunities for Shi'ite teachings were also a result of the favorable ground the fifth Imam had prepared during the twenty years of his imamate through the propagation of the true teachings of Islam and the sciences of the Household of the Prophet.

The Imam took advantage of the occasion to propagate the religious sciences until the very end of his imamate, which was contemporary with the end of the Umayyad and beginning of the Abbasid caliphates. He instructed many scholars in different fields of the intellectual and transmitted sciences, such as Zararah, Muhammad ibn Muslim, Mu'min Taq, Hisham ibn Hakam, Aban ibn Taghlib, Hisham ibn Salim, Hurayz, Hisham Kalbi Nassabah, and Jabir ibn Hayyan, the alchemist. Even some important Sunni scholars such as Sufyan Thawri, Abu Hanifah, the founder of the Hanafi school of law, Qadi Sukuni, Qadi Abu'l-Bakhtari, and others, had the honor of being his students. It is said that his classes and sessions of instructions produced four thousand scholars of hadith and other sciences. The number of traditions preserved from the fifth and sixth Imams is more than all the hadith that have been recorded from the Prophet and the other ten Imams combined.

But toward the end of his life the Imam was subjected to severe restrictions placed upon him by the Abbasid caliph Mansur, who ordered such torture and merciless killing of many of the descendants of the Prophets who were Shi'ite that his actions even surpassed the cruelty and heedlessness of the Umayyads. At his order they were arrested in groups, some thrown into deep and dark prisons and tortured until they died, while others were beheaded or buried alive or placed at the base of or between walls of buildings, and walls were constructed over them.

Hisham, the Umayyad caliph, had ordered the sixth Imam to be arrested and brought to Damascus. Later, the Imam was arrested by Saffah, the Abbasid caliph, and brought to Iraq. Finally, Mansur had him arrested again and brought to Samarrah where he had the Imam kept under supervision, was in every way harsh and discourteous to him, and several times thought of

killing him. Eventually the Imam was allowed to return to Medina where he spent the rest of his life in hiding, until he was poisoned and martyred through the intrigue of Mansur.

Upon hearing the news of the Imam's martyrdom, Mansur wrote to the governor of Medina instructing him to go to the house of the Imam on the pretext of expressing his condolences to the family, to ask for the Imam's will and testament and read it. Whoever was chosen by the Imam as his inheritor and successor should be beheaded on the spot. Of course the aim of Mansur was to put an end to the whole question of imamate and to Shi'ite aspirations. When the governor of Medina, following orders, read the last will and testament, he saw that the Imam had chosen four people rather than one to administer his last will and testament: the caliph himself, the governor of Medina, 'Abdallah Aftah, the Imam's older son, and Musa, his younger son. In this way the plot of Mansur failed.

The Seventh Imam

Imam Musa ibn Ja'far Kazim, the son of the sixth Imam, was born in 128/744 and was poisoned and martyred in prison in 183/799. He became Imam after the death of his father, through Divine Command and the decree of his forefathers. The seventh Imam was contemporary with the Abbasid caliphs, Mansur, Hadi, Mahdi and Harun.

He lived in very difficult times, in hiding, until finally Harun went on the hajj and in Medina had the Imam arrested while praying in the Mosque of the Prophet. He was chained and imprisoned, then taken from Medina to Basra and from Basra to Baghdad where for years he was transferred from one prison to another. Finally he died in Baghdad in the Sindi ibn Shahak prison through poisoning and was buried in the cemetery of the Quraysh which is now located in the city of Kazimayn.

The Eighth Imam

Imam Rida (Ali ibn Musa) was the son of the son of the seventh Imam and according to well-known accounts was born in 148/765 and died in 203/817. The eighth Imam had reached the imamate, after the death of his father, through Divine Command and the decree of his

forefathers. The period of his imamate coincided with the caliphate of Harun and then his sons Amin and Ma'mun. After the death of his father, Ma'mun fell into conflict with his brother Amin, which led to bloody wars and finally the assassination of Amin, after which Ma'mun became caliph. Until that day the policy of the Abbasid caliphate toward the Shi'ites had been increasingly harsh and cruel. Every once in a while one of the supporters of Ali ('alawis) would revolt, causing bloody wars and rebellions which were of great difficulty and consequence for the caliphate.

The Shi'ite Imams would not cooperate with those who carried out these rebellions and would not interfere with their affairs. The Shi'ites of that day, who comprised a considerable population, continued to consider the Imams as their religious leaders to whom obedience was obligatory and believed in them as the real caliphs of the Holy Prophet. They considered the caliphate to be far from the sacred authority of their Imams, for the caliphate had come to seem more like the courts of the Persian kings and Roman emperors and was being run by a group of people more interested in worldly rule than in the strict application of religious principles. The continuation of such a situation was dangerous for the structure of the caliphate and was a serious threat to it.

Ma'mun thought of finding a new solution for these difficulties which the seventy-year old policy of his Abbasid predecessors had not been able to solve. To accomplish this end he chose the eighth Imam as his successor, hoping this way to overcome two difficulties: first of all to prevent the descendants of the Prophet from rebelling against the government since they would be involved in the government themselves, and secondly, to cause the people to lose their spiritual belief and inner attachment to the Imams. This would be accomplished by having the Imams become engrossed in worldly matters and the politics of the caliphate itself, which had always been considered by the Shi'ite to be evil and impure. In this way their religious organization would crumble and they would no longer present any dangers to the caliphate. Obviously, after accomplishing these ends, the removal of the Imam would present no difficulties to the Abbasids.

In order to have this decision put into effect, Ma'mun asked the Imam to come to Marw from Medina. Once he had arrived there, Ma'mun offered him first the caliphate and then the succession to the caliphate. The Imam made his apologies and turned down the proposal, but he was finally induced to accept the successorship, with the condition that he would not interfere in governmental affairs or in the appointment or dismissal of government agents.

This event occurred in 200/814. But soon Ma'mun realized that he had committed an error, for there was a rapid spread of Shi'ism, a growth in the attachment of the populace to the Imam and an astounding reception given to the Imam by the people and even by the army and government agents. Ma'mun sought to find a remedy for this difficulty and had the Imam poisoned and martyred. After his death the Imam was buried in the city of Tus in Iran, which is now called Mashhad.

Ma'mun displayed great interest in having works on the intellectual sciences translated into Arabic. He organized gatherings in which scholars of different religions and sects assembled and carried out scientific and scholarly debates. The eighth Imam also participated in these assemblies and joined in the discussions with scholars of other religions. Many of these debates are recorded in the collections of Shi'ite hadiths.

The Ninth Imam

Imam Muhammad (ibn Ali) Taq (sometimes called Jaway and Ibn al-Rida) was the son of the eighth Imam. He was born in 195/809 in Medina and according to Shi'ite traditions was martyred in 220/835, poisoned by his wife, the daughter of Ma'mun, at the instigation of the Abbasid caliph Mu'tasim.

He was buried next to his grandfather, the seventh Imam, in Kazimayn. He became Imam after the death of his father through Divine Command and by the decree of his forefathers. At the time of the death of his father he was in Medina. Ma'mun called him to Baghdad which was then the capital of the caliphate and outwardly showed him much kindness.

He even gave the Imam his daughter in marriage and kept him in Baghdad. In reality he wanted in this way to keep a close watch upon the Imam from both outside and within his own household. The Imam spent some time in Baghdad and then with the consent of Ma'mun set out for Medina where he remained until Ma'mun's death. When Mu'tasim became caliph he called the Imam back to Baghdad and, as we have seen, through the Imam's wife had him poisoned and killed.

The Tenth Imam

Imam Ali ibn Muhammad Naqi (sometimes referred to by the title of Hadi), was the son of the ninth Imam. He was born in 212/827 in Medina and according to Shi'ite accounts was martyred through poisoning by Mu'tazz the Abbasid caliph, in 254/868.

During his lifetime the tenth Imam was contemporary with seven of the Abbasid caliphs: Ma'mun, Mu'tasim, Wathiq, Mutawakkil, Muntasir, Musta'in and Mu'tazz. It was during the rule of

Mu'tasim in 220/835 that his noble father died through poisoning in Baghdad. At that time Ali ibn Muhammad Naqi was in Medina. There he became the Imam through Divine Command and the decree of the Imams before him. He stayed in Medina teaching religious sciences until the time of Mutawakkil. In 243/857, as a result of certain false charges that were made, Mutawakkil ordered one of his government officials to invite the Imam from Medina to Samarrah which was then the capital. He himself wrote the Imam a letter full of kindness and courtesy asking him to come to the capital where they could meet. Upon arrival in Samarrah the Imam was also shown certain outward courtesy and respect. Yet at the same time Mutawakkil tried by all possible means to trouble and dishonor him. Many times he called the Imam to his presence with the aim of killing or disgracing him and had his house searched.

In his enmity toward the Household of the Prophet Mutawakkil had no equal among the Abbasid caliphs. He was especially opposed to Ali, whom he cursed openly. He even ordered a clown to ridicule Ali at voluptuous banquets. In the year 237/850 he ordered the mausoleum of Imam Husayn in Karbala and many of the houses around it to be torn down to the ground. The water was turned upon the tomb of the Imam.

He ordered the ground of the tomb to be plowed and cultivated so that any trace of the tomb would be forgotten. During the life of Mutawakkil the condition of life of the descendants of Ali in the Hijaz had reached such a pitiful state that their womenfolk had no veils with which to cover themselves. Many of them had only one old veil which they wore at the time of the daily prayers. Pressures of a similar kind were put on the descendants of Ali who lived in Egypt. The tenth Imam accepted in patience the tortures and afflictions of the Abbasid caliph Mutawakkil until the caliph died and was followed by Muntasir, Musta'in and finally Mu'tazz, whose intrigue led to the Imam's being poisoned and martyred.

The Eleventh Imam

Imam Hasan ibn Ali 'Askari, the son of the tenth Imam, was born in 232/845 and according to some Shi'ite sources was poisoned and killed in 260/872 through the instigation of the Abbasid caliph Mu'tamid. The eleventh Imam gained the imamate, after the death of his noble father, through Divine Command and through the decree of the previous Imams. During the seven years of his imamate, due to untold restrictions placed upon him by the caliphate, he lived in hiding and dissimulation (taqiya). He did not have any social contact with even the common people among the Shi'ite population. Only the elite of the Shi'ah were able to see him. Even so, he spent most of his time in prison.

There was extreme repression at that time because the Shi'ite population had reached a considerable level in both numbers and power. Everyone knew that the Shi'ah believed in the imamate, and the identity of the Shi'ite Imams was also known. Therefore, the caliphate kept the Imams under its close supervision more than ever before. It tried through every possible means and through secret plans to remove and destroy them. Also, the caliphate had come to know that the elite among the Shi'ah believed that the eleventh Imam, according to traditions cited by him as well as his forefathers, would have a son who was the promised Mahdi.

The coming of the Mahdi had been foretold in authenticated hadiths of the Prophet in both Sunni and Shi'ite sources. For this reason the eleventh Imam, more than other Imams, was kept under close watch by the caliphate. The caliph of the time had decided definitely to put an end to the imamate in Shi'ism through every possible means and to close the door to the imamate once and for all.

Therefore, as soon as the news of the illness of the eleventh Imam reached Mu'tamid, he sent a physician and a few of his trusted agents and judges to the house of the Imam to be with him and observe his condition and the situation within his house at all times. After the death of the Imam, they had the house investigated and all his female slaves examined by the midwife. For two years the secret agents of the caliph searched for the successor of the Imam until they lost all hope. The eleventh Imam was buried in his house in Samarrah next to his noble father.

Here it should be remembered that during their lifetimes the Imams trained many hundreds of scholars or religion and hadith, and it is these scholars who have transmitted to us information about the Imams. In order not to prolong the matter, the list of their names and works and their biographies have not been included here.

The Twelfth Imam (The Imam of Our Time)

The promised Mahdi, who is usually mentioned by his title of Imam-i 'Asr (the Imam of the "Period") and Sahib al-Zaman (the Lord of the Age), is the son of the eleventh Imam. His name is the same as that of the Holy Prophet. He was born in Samarrah in 256/868 and until 260/872 when his father was martyred, lived under his father's care and tutelage. He was hidden from public view and only a few of the elite among the Shi'ah were able to meet him.

After the martyrdom of his father he became Imam and by Divine Command went into occultation

(ghaybat). Thereafter he appeared only to his deputies (na'ib) and even then only in exceptional circumstances.

The Imam chose as a special deputy for a time Uthman ibn Sa'id 'Umari, one of the companions of his father and grandfather who was his confidant and trusted friend. Through his deputy the Imam would answer the demands and questions of the Shi'ah. After Uthman ibn Sa'id, his son Muhammad ibn Uthman Umari was appointed the deputy of the Imam. After the death of Muhammad ibn Uthman, Abu'l Qasim Husayn ibn Ruh Nawbakhti was the special deputy, and after his death Ali ibn Muhammad Simmari was chosen for this task.

A few days before the death of Ali ibn Muhammad Simmari in 329/939 an order was issued by the Imam stating that in six days Ali ibn Muhammad Simmari would die. Henceforth the special deputation of the Imam would come to an end and the major occultation (ghaybat-i kubra) would begin and would continue until the day God grants permission to the Imam to manifest himself.

The occultation of the twelfth Imam is, therefore, divided into two parts: the first, the minor occultation (ghaybat-i sughra) which began in 260/872 and ended in 329/939, lasting about seventy years; the second, the major occultation which commenced in 329/939 and will continue as long as God wills it. In a hadith upon whose authenticity everyone agrees, the Holy Prophet has said, "If there were to remain in the life of the world but one day, God would prolong that day until He sends in it a man from my community and my household. His name will be the same as my name. He will fill the earth with equity and justice as it was filled with oppression and tyranny."

On the Appearance of the Mahdi

In the discussion on prophecy and the imamate it was indicated that as a result of the law of general guidance which governs all of creation, man is of necessity endowed with the power of receiving revelation through prophecy, which directs him toward the perfection of the human norm and the well-being of the human species. Obviously, if this perfection and happiness were not possible for man, whose life possesses a social aspect, the very fact that he is endowed with his power would be meaningless and futile. But there is no futility in creation.

In other words, ever since he has inhabited the earth, man has had the wish to lead a social life filled with happiness in its true sense and has striven toward this end. If such a wish were not to have an objective existence it would never have been imprinted upon man's inner nature, in the same way that if there were not food there would have been no hunger. Or if there were to be no water there would be no thirst and if there were to be no reproduction there would have been no sexual attraction between the sexes.

Therefore, by reason of inner necessity and determination, the future will see a day when human society will be replete with justice and when all will live in peace and tranquillity, when human beings will be fully possessed of virtue and perfection. The establishment of such a condition will occur through human hands but with Divine succor. And the leader of such a society, who will be the savior of man, is called in the language of the hadith, the Mahdi.

In the different religions that govern the world such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Islam there are references to a person who will come as the savior of mankind. These religions have usually given happy tidings of his coming, although there are naturally certain differences in detail that can be discerned when these teachings are compared carefully. The hadith of the Holy Prophet upon which all Muslims agree, "The Mahdi is of my progeny," refers to this same truth.

There are numerous hadiths cited in Sunni and Shi'ite sources from the Holy Prophet and the Imams concerning the appearance of the Mahdi, such as that he is of the progeny of the Prophet and that his appearance will enable human society to reach true perfection and the full realization of spiritual life. In addition, there are numerous other traditions concerning the fact that the Mahdi is the son of the eleventh Imam, Hasan al-'Askari. They agree that after being born and undergoing a long occultation the Mahdi will appear again, filling with justice the world that has been corrupted by injustice and iniquity.

As an example, Ali ibn Musa al-Rida (the eighth Imam) has said, in the course of a hadith, "The Imam after me is my son, Muhammad, and after him his son Ali, and after Ali his son, Hasan, and after Hasan his son Hujjat al-Qa'im, who is awaited during his occultation and obeyed during his manifestation. If there remain from the life of the world but a single day, Allah will extend that day until he becomes manifest, and fill the world with justice in the same way that it had been filled with iniquity. But when? As for news of the 'hour,' verily my father told me, having heard it from his father who heard it from his father who heard it from his ancestors who heard it from Ali, that it was asked of the Holy Prophet, 'Oh Prophet of God, when will the "support" (qa'im) who is from thy family appear?' He said, 'His case is like that of the Hour (of the Resurrection). "He alone will manifest it at its proper time. It is heavy in the heavens and the earth. It cometh not to you save unawares" (Quran, VII, 187).'"

Saqr ibn Abi Dulaf said, "I heard from Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Ali al-Rida [the ninth Imam] who said, 'The Imam after me is my son Ali; his command is my command; his word is my word; to command is the command of his father ; to obey him is to obey his father.' After these words the Imam remained silent. I said to him, 'Oh son of the Prophet, who will be the Imam after Hasan?' The Imam cried hard, then said, 'Verily after Hasan his son is the awaited Imam who is "al-qa'im bi'l-haqq" (He who is supported by the Truth).'"

Musa ibn Ja'far Baghdadi said, "I hear from the Imam Abu Muhammad al-Hasan ibn Ali [the eleventh Imam] who said, 'I see that after me differences will appear among you concerning the Imam after me. Whoso accepts the Imams after the Prophet of God but denies my son is like the person who accepts all the prophets but denies the prophethood of Muhammad, the Prophet of God, upon whom be peace and blessing. And whoso denies [Muhammad] the Prophet of God is like one who has denied all the prophets of God, for to obey the last of us is like obeying the first and to deny the last of us is like denying the first. But beware! Verily for my son there is an occultation during which all people will fall into doubt except those whom Allah protects."

The opponents of Shi'ism protest that according to the beliefs of this school the Hidden Imam should by now be nearly twelve centuries old, whereas this is impossible for any human being. In answer it must be said that the protest is based only on the unlikelihood of such an occurrence, not its impossibility. Of course such a long lifetime or a life of a longer period is unlikely. But those who study the hadiths of the Holy Prophet and the Imams will see that they refer to this life as one possessing miraculous qualities. Miracles are certainly not impossible nor can they be negated through scientific arguments. It can never be proved that the causes and agents that are functioning in the world are solely those that we see and know and that other causes which we do not know or whose effects and actions we have not seen nor understood do not exist. It is in this way possible that in one or several members of mankind there can be operating certain causes and agents which bestow upon them a very long life of a thousand or several thousand years. Medicine has not even lost hope of discovering a way to achieve very long life spans. In any case such protests from "peoples of the Book" such as Jews, Christians and Muslims are most strange for they accept the miracles of the prophets of God according to their own sacred scriptures.

The opponents of Shi'ism also protest that, although Shi'ism considers the Imam necessary in order to expound the injunctions and verities of religion and to guide the people, the occultation of the Imam is the negation of this very purpose, for an Imam in occultation who cannot be reached by mankind cannot be in any way beneficial or effective. The opponents say that if God wills to bring forth an Imam to reform mankind He is able to create him at the necessary moment and does not need to create him thousands of years earlier. In answer it must be said that such people have not really understood the meaning of the Imam, for in the discussion on the imamate it became clear that the duty of the Imam is not only the formal explanation of the religious sciences and exoteric guidance of the people. In the same way that he has the duty of guiding men outwardly, the Imam also bears the function of walayat and the esoteric guidance of men. It is he who directs man's spiritual life and orients the inner aspect of human action toward God. Clearly, his physical presence or absence has no effect in this matter. The Imam watches over men inwardly and is in communion with the soul and spirit of men even if he be hidden from their physical eyes. His existence is always necessary even if the time has not yet arrived for his outward appearance and the universal reconstruction that he is to bring about.

The Spiritual Message of Shi'ism

The message of Shi'ism to the world can be summarized in one sentence: "To know God." Or in other words, it is to instruct man to follow the path of Divine realization and the knowledge of God in order to gain felicity and salvation. And this message is contained in the very phrase with which the Holy Prophet commenced his prophetic mission when he said: "Oh men ! Know God in His Oneness (and acknowledge Him) so that you will gain salvation."

As a summary explanation of this message we will add that man is attached by nature to many goals in this worldly life and to material pleasures. He loves tasty food and drink, fashionable dress, attractive palaces and surroundings, a beautiful and pleasuring wife, sincere friends and great wealth. And in another direction he is attracted to political power, position, reputation, the extension of his rule and dominion and the destruction of anything that is opposed to his wishes. But in his inner and primordial, God-given nature man understands that all these are means created for man, but man is not created for all these things. These things should be subservient to man and follow him and not vice versa. To consider the stomach and the region below it as a final end of life is the logic of cattle and sheep. To tear up, cut and destroy other is the logic of the tiger, the wolf and the fox. The logic inherent in human existence is the attainment of wisdom and nothing else.

This logic based upon wisdom with the power which it possesses to discern between reality and the unreal, guides us toward the truth and not toward things our emotions demand or toward passions, selfishness and egoism. This logic considers man as a part of the totality of creation without any separate independence or the possibility of a rebellious self-centeredness. In contrast to the current belief that man is the master of creation and tames rebellious nature and conquers it to force it to obey his wishes and desires, we find that in reality man himself is an instrument in the hand of Universal Nature and is ruled and commanded by it.

This logic based upon wisdom invites man to concentrate more closely upon the apprehension he has of the existence of this world until it becomes clear to him that the world of existence and all that is in it does not issue from itself but rather from an Infinite Source. He will then know that all the beauty and ugliness, all these creatures of the earth and the heavens, which appear outwardly as independent realities, gain reality only through another Reality and are manifested only in Its Light, not by themselves and through themselves. In the same way that the "realities" of today no more than vaguely remembered dreams in relation to what will appear as "reality" tomorrow. In the last analysis, everything in itself is no more than a tale and a dream. Only God is Reality in the absolute sense, the One Who does not perish. Under the protection of His Being, everything gains existence and becomes manifested through the Light of His Essence.

If man becomes endowed with such vision and power of apprehension, then the tent of his separative existence will fall down before his eyes like a bubble on the surface of water. He will see with his eyes that the world and all that is in it depend upon an Infinite Being who possesses life, power, knowledge and every perfection to an infinite degree. Man and every other being in the world are like so many windows which display according to their capacity the world of eternity which transcends them and lies beyond them.

It is at this moment that man takes from himself and all creatures the quality of independence and primacy and returns these qualities to their Owner. He detaches himself from all things to attach himself solely to the One God. Before His Majesty and Grandeur he does nothing but bow in humility. Only then does he become guided and directed by God so that whatever he knows he knows in God. Through Divine guidance he becomes adorned with moral and spiritual virtue and pure actions which are the same as Islam itself, the submission to God, the religion that is in the primordial nature of things.

This is the highest degree of human perfection and the station of the perfect man (the Universal Man; insan-i kamil), namely the Imam who has reached this rank through Divine grace. Furthermore, those who have reached this station through the practice of spiritual methods, with the different ranks and stations that they possess, are the true followers of the Imam. It becomes thus clear that the knowledge of God and of the Imam are inseparable in the same way that the knowledge of God is inextricably connected to the knowledge of oneself. For he who knows his own symbolic existence has already come to know the true existence which belongs solely to God who is independent and without need of anything whatsoever.