

The Qur'an and Imāmah

by

Abū Muḥammad al-Afriqī

www.mahajjah.com

Transliteration key

أ- 'ā	ض - ḍ
آ - ā	ط - ṭ
ب - b	ظ - ḏ
ت - t	ع - 'c
ث - th	غ - gh
ج - j	ف - f
ح - ḥ	ق - q
خ - kh	ك - k
د - d	ل - l
ذ - dh	م - m
ر - r	ن - n
ز - z	و - w, ū
س - s	ه - h
ش - sh	ي - y, ī
ص - ṣ	

The Qur'an and Imāmah

by

Abū Muḥammad al-Afriqi

There is no gainsaying that of all differences that exist between the Ahl as-Sunnah and the Shī'ah, the issue of Imāmah is by far the most serious. It is in fact quite within the limits of reason and logic to say that the question of Imāmah is the root of all Sunni-Shī'i differences; all other differences will upon closer scrutiny be found to result from the difference that exists on that central point.

Therefore, no person or organisation who is serious about bringing Shī'is and Sunnis closer to one another can afford to ignore the doctrine of Imāmah. All endeavours aimed at removing the barriers that separate the Ahl as-Sunnah from the Shī'ah must start from this point. Starting from anywhere else would be similar to treating the symptoms, and not the cause, of a disease. For a while the symptoms might disappear, only to be reactivated at a later stage by the dormant cause. Likewise, attempting to solve Sunni-Shī'i differences from any perspective other than that of its root, Imāmah, might for the immediate moment create the impression of removing obstacles to Muslim unity. In reality those very same obstacles will return as soon as the euphoria at the creation of that unity subsides.

As Muslims we are obliged to refer the differences that exist amongst us to Allah and His Rasūl. In this series of articles we refer the doctrine of Imāmah to the Qur'an, with the purpose of ascertaining whether this doctrine as conceived of and believed in by the Ithnā 'Ashari (or Ja'fari) Shī'ah is justified by Divine Revelation or not.

The Doctrine of Imāmah

Before going any further it would be well-advised, for the benefit of those who may not be fully aware of what the Imāmah of the Shī'ah means, to expand somewhat upon the detail of the issue. Once the reader has a proper focus of what Imāmah

means to the Shī'ah, and what its position in the belief structure of the Shī'ah is, we will continue with our discussion of that doctrine in the light of the Qur'an.

Essentially, Imāmah is about leadership of the Ummah after the demise of Rasūlullah ﷺ. The Shī'ah believe that just as Allah chose Muḥammad ﷺ as His Messenger to mankind, he chose and appointed a line of twelve men to succeed him as the leaders of the Ummah in all matters, spiritual as well as temporal. The first of these leaders, or Imāms as they are called, was 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib رضي الله عنه. He was succeeded by his eldest son Hasan, and he by his brother Husayn. After Husayn the Imāmah continued in his progeny until the year 260AH, when the twelfth Imām, a child of five, disappeared upon the death of his father. He is believed to be the Awaited Mahdi who will return from occultation to establish justice upon the earth. To these twelve men from amongst the family of Rasūlullah ﷺ alone belongs the right to assume leadership of the Ummah. There are two aspects to Imāmah that need to be looked at with attention. The first is the nature of the appointment of the Imāms, and the second is the nature of their office.

The nature of the appointment of the Twelve Imāms

As far as the nature of their appointment is concerned, it is a matter of consensus amongst the Shī'ah that the right of their twelve Imāms to lead the Ummah was bestowed by Allah Ta'ala Himself. No distinction is made between the appointment of Muḥammad ﷺ as the Messenger of Allah and the appointment of the twelve Imāms as his successors. Underscoring this vital aspect of Imāmah, 'Allāmah Muḥammad Husayn Kāshif al-Ghita, who was the most prominent Shī'ī 'Ālim of Najaf in Iraq during the seventies, writes in his book *Asl ash-Shī'ah wa-Uṣūlūhā*:

Imāmah is a divine station, just like Nubuwwah. Just as Allah chooses whomsoever He wants to for Nubuwwah and Risālah ... similarly, for Imāmah too, He selects whomsoever He wishes.¹

1. *Asl ash-Shī'ah wa-Uṣūlūhā* p. 58 (Mu'ssasat al-A'lami, Beirut)

It is interesting to note that the book from which this statement is drawn was written for the express purpose of correcting contemporary misconceptions about the Shī'ah. Since Imāmah is then for all practical purposes on exactly the same plane as Nubuwwah and Risālah, consistency would dictate that the rejection of Imāmah be censured with the same severity as the rejection of Nubuwwah and Risālah. If rejection of the Nubuwwah of Muḥammad ﷺ cast the likes of Abū Jahl and Abū Lahab outside the fold of Islam, then it is only logical to expect that rejection of the Imāmah of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib ؑ should cast the likes of Abū Bakr, 'Umar and the rest of the Ṣaḥābah ؓ out of the fold of Islam. For one who views the problem from this perspective it thus comes as no surprise to find the Shī'ah narrating from their Imāms that “all the people became murtadd after the death of Rasūlullah, except three,”¹ since it is consistent with the principle that equates Imāmah with Nubuwwah in the sense that each of them is a position appointed by Allah.

What is surprising is the opinion the Shī'ah of today express about the Ahl as-Sunnah in general. One would expect them to say about the Ahl as-Sunnah as they have said about the Ṣaḥābah: that they are unbelievers, out of the fold of Islam. After all, there are many non-Muslims who believe in the oneness of Allah, but do not believe in the prophethood of Muḥammad ﷺ, and for that reason we all regard them as unbelievers. If Imāmah is then a “divine station, like Nubuwwah,” Sunnis who do not believe in the Imāmah of the Twelve Imāms must also be unbelievers. There have been many 'ulamā of the Shī'ah in the past who have displayed consistency in this regard and declared all those who deny the Imāmah of the Twelve Imāms—like the Ahl as-Sunnah—unbelievers. For example, Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi (died 381AH), the author of one of the four canonical hadith collections of the Shī'ah, *Man Lā Yahduruhu al-Faqih*, states in the treatise in which he expounds the creed of the Shī'ah:

It is our belief about one who rejects the Imāmah of Amir al-Mu'minin (Sayyidunā 'Alī) and the Imāms after him that he is the same as one who

1. *al-Kāfi* vol. 8 (*Rawdat al-Kāfi*) p. 167 (Dār al-Adwa', Beirut, 1992)

rejects the Nubuwwah of the Ambiya’.

It is our belief concerning a person who accepts (the Imāmah of) Amir al-Mu’minin but rejects any one of the Imāms after him, that he is similar to one who believes in all the Ambiya’ but rejects the Nubuwwah of Muḥammad ﷺ. The Nabi ﷺ said: “The Imāms after me are twelve. The first is Amir al-Mu’minin ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the last is the Qā’im (the Mahdi). Obedience to them is obedience to me, and disobedience to them is disobedience to me. Thus, whoever rejects one of them has rejected me.”

Whoever wrongfully claims the Imāmah is an accursed oppressor. Whoever places the Imāmah in anyone besides its rightful repositories is an accursed oppressor. The Nabi ﷺ said: “Whoever shall deny ‘Alī his Imāmah after me has denied my Nubuwwah, and whoever denies me my Nubuwwah has denied Allah His divinity.” Imām Ja’far as-Sadiq said: “Whoever doubts the kufr of our enemies is himself a kāfir.”¹

His student Shaykh Mufid (died 413AH) writes:

There is consensus amongst the Imāmiyyah (the Ithnā ‘Ashari or Ja’fari Shī‘ah) that whoever denies the Imāmah of anyone of the Imāms, and denies the duty of obedience to them that Allah has decreed, that such a person is a kafir, misguided, and that he deserves everlasting torment in Hell.²

The prolific Abū Ja’far at-Tusi, called Shaykh at-Ta’ifah, (died 460AH), who is the author of two of the four canonical hadith collections, has the following to say:

Rejection of Imāmah is kufr, just as rejection of Nubuwwah is kufr.³

1. *Risālat al-I’tiqād* p. 111-114, quoted by al-Majlisi: *Bihār al-Anwār* vol. 27 p. 62 (Dār al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, Tehran, 1387)

2. *al-Masā’il*, quoted in *Bihār al-Anwār* vol. 8 p. 366

3. *Talkhis ash-Shafi* vol. 4 p. 131 (Dār al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, Qum, 3rd ed. 1394)

The mujaddid of Shīʿism in the eighth century after the Hijrah, Ibn Mutahhar al-Hilli (died 726AH) expresses similar sentiments in the following terms:

Imāmah is a universal grace (*lutf ʿāmm*) while Nubuwwah is a special grace (*lutf khāss*), because it is possible that a specific period in time can be void of a living Nabi, while the same is not true for the Imām. To reject the universal grace is worse than to reject the special grace.¹

This is the opinion held by four of the most eminent classical scholars of the Shīʿah, and if seen from the angle of consistency, it is a commendable position indeed. Yet, if one has to ask the Shīʿah of today (especially recent converts to Shīʿism) whether they believe Sunnis are Muslims or not, they will respond with surprise, and might even appear grieved at such a question. As far as recent converts to Shīʿism are concerned, this is to be expected, since it is in the interest of any propaganda scheme that certain facts be kept secret from neophytes. However those who are more knowledgeable about the technicalities of Shīʿism will know that in the eyes of the Shīʿah a distinction is made between a Muslim and a Muʿmin. All those who profess Islam outwardly are Muslims: Sunnis, Zaydis, Muʿtazilis, and all other sects. A Muʿmin, however, is only he who believes in the Twelve Imāms. By this clever ruse the fuqaha of the Shīʿah kill several birds with one stone. By accepting all other sects as Muslims they protect themselves against the ridiculousness of casting out of the fold of Islam over 90% of its adherents, and the same men who carried the banner of Islam to all corners of the world. At the same time they avoid the antagonism of Sunnis and others, which facilitates proselytisation for them. On the other hand, by the subtle measure of distinguishing Muslim from Muʿmin they effectively excommunicate their opponents. Muslims are those to whom the laws of Islam apply in this world. It is therefore permissible to intermarry with them, to pray behind them, to eat what they slaughter, etc., while Muʿmins are those to whom salvation in the hereafter belongs exclusively, and that depends upon belief in the Twelve Imāms. This distinction between Muslim and Muʿmin can be found throughout

1 *al-Alfāyn* p. 3 (al-Maktabah al-HayDāriyyah, Najaf, 3rd ed. 1388)

classical Shī'ī literature. The seventh century faqih, Yahya ibn Sa'īd al-Hilli (died 690AH), for example writes in his manual on fiqh, *al-Jami' lish-Shara'i'*:

It is correct for a Muslim to make an endowment (waqf) upon Muslims. Muslims are those who utter the two shahadahs, and their children. But if a person makes something waqf upon the Mu'minin, it will be exclusively for the Imāmiyyah who believe in the Imāmah of the Twelve Imāms.¹

Eight centuries later, exactly the same view is propounded by Ayatullah Khomeini. In his own manual of fiqh, *Tahrir al-Wasilah*, he states:

If a person makes a waqf upon the Muslims it will be for all those who confess the two shahadahs ... If an Imāmi makes a waqf upon the Mu'minin it will be restricted to the Ithna 'Ashariyyah.²

Some amongst the contemporary spokesmen for Shī'ism, like Kashif al-Ghita, have realised that even this ruse is not sufficiently subtle. He thus devised another terminology. He speaks of being a Mu'min in the special sense, and of being a Mu'min in the general sense. Whoever believes in Imāmah is regarded as a Mu'min in the special sense, while those who do not believe in it are regarded as being Mu'min in the general sense, as a result of which all the temporal laws of Islam are applicable to him. The result of this difference, he says, will become apparent on the Day of Judgement, in the degrees of Divine proximity and honour that will be bestowed upon the believers in Imāmah.³

To us this reveals much more than what the author intended. It reveals to us that when the Shī'ah say they regard Sunnis as Muslims, it is in strict reference to worldly matters. In eschatological matters, matters of the hereafter, Sunnis who do not believe in the Imāmah of the Twelve Imāms are just like Jews, Christians,

1. *al-Jami' lish-Shara'i'* p. 371 (Mu'assasat Sayyid ash-Shuhada' al-'Ilmiyyah, Qum, 1405)

2. *Tahrir al-Wasilah* vol. 2 p. 72 (Mu'assasat Isma'iliyan, Qum 1408)

3. *Asl ash-Shī'ah wa-Usūlūhā* pp. 58-59

Buddhists, Hindus or any other rejectors of the Nubuwwah of Rasūlullah ﷺ. The only reason for saying that Sunnis are Muslims is expedience and convenience. Without professing such an opinion the Shī'ah would have had to retreat into seclusion and bear ostracism from the rest of the Muslim world. This reason is given by Sayyid 'Abdullah Shubbar (died 1232AH) in his commentary of *az-Ziyarat al-Jami'ah*, the comprehensive du'a read at the graves of the Imāms. At the point where the ziyarah reads:

Whoever denies you is a kafir,

he comments upon it, saying:

There are many narrations that indicate that the opponents are kafir. To document all of them would require a separate book. Reconciling such narrations with that which is known about the Imāms, viz. that they used to live, eat and socialise with them, leads to the conclusion that they (the opponents) are kafir, and that they will dwell in Hell forever, but that in this world the laws of Islam are applied to them as a gesture of mercy and beneficence to the True Denomination (the Shī'ah), since it is impossible to avoid them.¹

The nature of the office of the Imāms

On this point it would be sufficient to say that the Shī'ah bestow upon their Imāms all the perfections and accomplishments of the Ambiya', and even more. It would be impossible to document here all the narrations that deal with the status of the Imāms, but it might be just as informative to quote the chapters under which they have been documented in a source that is described as a "veritable encyclopaedia of the knowledge of the Imāms": *Bihār al-Anwār* of 'Allamah Muḥammad Baqir al-Majlisi (died 1111AH), widely reputed to be the greatest and most influential Shī'ī scholar of the Safawid era. During his lifetime he occupied the office of Shaykh al-Islam in Isfahan, capital of the Safawids, and even to this day his works

1. *al-Anwar al-Lami'ah Sharh az-Ziyarat al-Jami'ah* p. 176 (Mu'assasat al-Bi'thah, Mashhad, 1st ed. 1457)

are indispensable to the Shī'ī clergy as well as their lay public. We quote here the name of the chapter, as well as the number of narrations he documents in each chapter:

1. The Imāms possess more knowledge than the Ambiya' (13 narrations)¹
2. The Imāms are superior to the Ambiya' and the entire creation. The Covenant of the Imāms was taken from them (the Ambiya'), the Malā'ikah and the entire creation. The (major prophets called) ulul-'Azm (Nuh, Ibrahim, Musa and 'Isa) attained the status of ulul-'Azm on account of loving the Imāms. (88 narrations)²
3. The du'as of the Ambiya' were answered because they invoked the wasilah of the Imāms. (16 narrations)³
4. The Imāms can bring the dead back to life. They can cure blindness and leprosy. They possess all the miracles of the Ambiya' (4 narrations)⁴
5. Nothing of the knowledge of Heaven, Earth, Jannah and Jahannam is hidden from them. The Kingdom of the Heavens and the Earth was shown to them. They know all that happened and that will happen up to the Day of Resurrection. (22 narrations)⁵
6. The Imāms know the truth of a person's faith or hypocrisy. They possess a book that contains the names of the inmates of Jannah, the names of their supporters and their enemies. (40 narrations)⁶

1. *Bihār al-Anwār* vol. 26 pp. 194-200

2. *ibid.* vol. 26 pp. 267-318

3. *ibid.* vol. 26 pp. 319-332

4. *ibid.* vol. 27 pp. 29-31

5. *ibid.* vol. 26 pp. 109-107

6. *ibid.* vol. 26 pp. 117-132

The titles of these chapters create quite a vivid impression of the narrated material upon which the Shī'ah base their faith. The office of Imāmah can thus be seen to incorporate more than just the political leadership of the Ummah. The Imāms are more than just heads of state with a divine right to rule. They are the repositories of every branch of knowledge and perfection possessed by the Ambiya'. The existence of the world depends upon their presence. They are the intermediaries upon whose intercession acceptance of the prayers of even the Ambiya' depends. Their office is one that combines political, religious, scientific, cosmological and metaphysical supremacy over the entire creation. From this one can understand the reason for al-Khomeini's statement in the book *al-Hukūmat al-Islamiyyah*, upon which rests the entire philosophy of his revolution:

It is of the undeniable tenets of our faith that our Imāms possess a status with Allah that neither Angel nor Messenger can aspire to.¹

After this introduction to the concept of Imāmah, the nature of the appointment of the Imāms, and the nature of their office, we pose the question: Is belief in such a concept justified and upheld by the Qur'an? Surely a belief of such momentousness, an article of faith with such far reaching consequences, that supercedes even belief in the Ambiya', must be rooted in the Qur'an, the book which was revealed by Allah

تَبَيَّنَا لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً وَبُشْرَى لِّلْمُسْلِمِينَ

as an explanation of all things, a guide, a mercy, and glad tidings to the Muslims.²

It is with the purpose of answering this question that this article is written.

1. *al-Hukūmat al-Islamiyyah* p. 52 (Ministry of Guidance, Iran.)

2. *an-Naḥl*:89

Imāmah and Prophethood in the Qur'an

In this article we investigate the Qur'anic foundations of the Shī'ite concept of Imāmah. By analysis of the usage of the word Imām and its plural form a'immah in the Qur'an we will investigate whether the Qur'an provides any basis for the doctrine of Imāmah as formulated in Shī'ite theology. In limiting our investigation to the Qur'an, it is not our contention that the Sunnah is inconsequential in issues of doctrine. Instead, it is out of the conviction that a doctrinal issue like Imāmah, which Shī'ite theology places above Nubuwwah, must find textual support from the Qur'an. After all, the "secondary" issue of Nubuwwah finds more than ample support in the pages of the Qur'an. No one, after reading the clear and unambiguous Qur'anic texts wherein Allah makes mention of His Messengers and Prophets, their status,

وَكُلًّا فَضَّلْنَا عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ

And each (of them) we favoured above all the worlds.¹

their stories,

وَهَلْ آتَاكَ حَدِيثُ مُوسَى

And has there come to you the story of Mūsā?²

وَأْتَلُ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ

And recite to them the story of Ibrāhim.³

نَحْنُ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ أَحْسَنَ الْقَصَصِ

We relate unto you you the most beautiful of stories.⁴

1. al-An'ām : 86

2. Tāhā : 9

3. ash-Shu'arā : 69

4. Yūsuf : 4

the explicit mention of their names,

وَتِلْكَ حُجَّتُنَا آتَيْنَاهَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ عَلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ نَرْفَعُ دَرَجَاتٍ مِّنْ نَّشَأٍ ۗ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ حَكِيمٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٨٣﴾ وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ إِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ ۗ كُلًّا هَدَيْنَا وَنُوحًا هَدَيْنَا مِن قَبْلُ وَمِن ذُرِّيَّتِهِ دَاوُدَ وَسُلَيْمَانَ وَأَيُّوبَ وَيُوسُفَ وَمُوسَىٰ وَهَارُونَ ۗ وَكَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾ وَزَكَرِيَّا وَيَحْيَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَإِلْيَاسَ ۗ كُلٌّ مِّنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿٨٥﴾ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَالْيَسَعَ وَيُونُسَ وَلُوطًا ۗ وَكُلًّا فَضَّلْنَا عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ

Such was the argument we gave Ibrahim against his people. We raise in degree whomsoever We will, and your Lord is Wise, All-Knowing. We gave him Ishaq and Ya'qūb; each of them We guided. And before that, We guided Nuh, and among his (Ibrāhim's) progeny (We guided) Dāwūd, and Sulaymān, and Ayyūb, and Yūsuf, and Mūsā, and Hārūn; thus do We reward those who good. And (We guided) Zakariyya, and Yahya, and ʿĪsā, and Ilyās; all of them of the Righteous. And Ismaʿīl, and Alyasaʿ, and Yūnus, and Lūṭ; each of them We favoured above all the worlds.¹

and the importance of belief in them as an integral part of faith in Islam,

وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ ضَلَالًا بَعِيدًا

And whoever denies Allah, His Messengers, His Books and the Last Day has clearly gone astray.²

can reasonably doubt that the Qur'an supports, or rather enjoins, belief in Nubuwwah. The question now is: Does the same hold true for Imāmah? If Imāmah is superior to Nubuwwah, as the theology of the Ithnā 'Ashari Shī'ah teaches, it would be only reasonable to expect that the Qur'an would deal in equally explicit terms with Imāmah; and if not, that at least a clear, unambiguous picture what Imāmah is and who the Imāms are, would be drawn by the Qur'an.

1. al-An'ām : 83-86

2 an-Nisa' : 136

Usage of the word Imām in the Qur'an

In what follows we will investigate how the word Imām and its plural A'immah have been used in the Qur'an. From the way Allah has used the word in the Qur'an it will then be seen whether the Shīrī concept of Imāmah that has been explained above, finds any sort of Qur'anic support.

A book

The word Imām recurs 7 times in the Qur'an, while its plural form, a'immah, appears 5 times. In 3 of these cases it refers explicitly to a book:

وَمِنْ قَبْلِهِ كِتَابُ مُوسَى إِمَامًا وَرَحْمَةً ط

And before it was the Book of Musa, a guide and a mercy.¹

وَمِنْ قَبْلِهِ كِتَابُ مُوسَى إِمَامًا وَرَحْمَةً ط

And before it was the Book of Musa, a guide and a mercy.²

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نُحْيِي الْمَوْتَى وَنَكْتُبُ مَا قَدَّمُوا وَآثَارَهُمْ ط وَكُلَّ شَيْءٍ أَحْصَيْنَاهُ فِي إِمَامٍ مُبِينٍ

Verily, we will restore the dead to life, and we write that which they sent forth, and that which they left behind; and of everything we have taken account in a Clear Book.³

The champions of kufr

In another 2 cases it refers to the champions of kufr:

فَقَاتِلُوا أُمَّةَ الْكُفْرِ

1. Hūd : 17

2. al-Ahqāf : 12

3. Yāsīn : 12

Fight the leaders of kufr.¹

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أئِمَّةً يَدْعُونَ إِلَى النَّارِ ۚ

And We made them leaders who call towards the Fire.²

A road

One reference is to a clearly discernible road:

وَأَنَّهُمَا لِبَآئِمَامٍ مُّبِينٍ

And verily, the two (cities) lie next to a clear road.³

Leadership of the Israelites

In the remaining six places where the word is used, it is used in terms of its literal meaning, i.e. leadership. In Surah al-Ambiya' it is stated:

قُلْنَا لِنَارٍ كُونِي بَرْدًا وَسَلَامًا عَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ ﴿٦٩﴾ وَأَرَادُوا بِهِ كَيْدًا فَجَعَلْنَاهُمُ الْأَخْسَرِينَ ﴿٧٠﴾ وَنَجَّيْنَاهُ وَلُوطًا إِلَى الْأَرْضِ الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا لِلْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٧١﴾ وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ إِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ نَافِلَةً ۗ وَكُلًّا جَعَلْنَا صَالِحِينَ ﴿٧٢﴾ وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ فِعْلَ الْخَيْرَاتِ وَإِقَامَ الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءَ الزَّكَاةِ وَكَانُوا لَنَا عَابِدِينَ ﴿٧٣﴾

We said: O fire, be cool and (a means of) safety unto Ibrāhim. And they planned against him; but We made them the greater losers. And We delivered him and Lut to the land which We blessed for the nations. And We gave him Ishaq, and Ya'qub as an additional gift; and all of them We made righteous men. And We made them leaders who guide by Our command; and We revealed to them the doing of good, the establishment of prayer and the giving of alms. And they were men who served Us.⁴

1. at-Tawbah : 12

2. al-Qasas : 41

3. al-Hijr : 79

4 al-Ambiya' : 69-73

In this extract, which had to be extended somewhat in order that the reader may see the full context in which the word a’immah is used, one clearly sees its association with the function of the Ambiya’ as the leaders of men, who guide them towards Allah. This unequivocal identification of a’immah as Ambiya’ leads us to conclude that the reference in Surah as-Sajdah too, is to the Ambiya’, and not to any other category of men:

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ فَلَا تَكُنْ فِي مِرْيَةٍ مِّنْ لِّقَائِهِ وَجَعَلْنَاهُ هُدًى لِّبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ ﴿٢٣﴾ وَجَعَلْنَا مِنْهُمْ آئِمَّةً يَهْتَدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا لَمَّا صَبَرُوا ۗ وَكَانُوا بِآيَاتِنَا يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

Indeed, We gave Mūsā the Book, so be not in doubt about meeting him; and We made it a (source of) guidance for the Children of Isra’il. And We made from amongst them leaders who guided by Our command, when they persevered. And they had full certainty in Our signs.¹

Even if the scope of a’immah in this verse were to be extended to include people other than the Ambiya’, there is nothing to justify its identification with the elaborate doctrine of Imāmah as conceived of by the Shī’ah.

In a third verse Allah speaks of His plans for the oppressed Israelites in Egypt:

وَرُبِّيذُ أَنْ نَمَنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتُضِعِفُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ أَئِمَّةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ الْوَارِثِينَ

And We wished to be gracious to those who were oppressed in the land, and to make them leaders, and to make them heirs.²

In order to see who the word a’immah refers to in this verse one only has to look at the persons in whom this divine wish came to fulfilment. It was primarily in Nabi Mūsā and the other prophet-kings of Bani Isra’il like Nabi Dāwūd and Nabi Sulayman عَلَيْهِمُ السَّلَامُ that the leadership referred to in this verse, came to be vested.

1. as-Sajdah : 23-24

2. al-Qasas : 5

If at times they were ruled by men other than the Ambiya', the status of those leaders was never seen to be superior to the rank of the Ambiya'. Verses like the above three, apart from dealing specifically with the Ambiya' of Bani Isra'il, are not in the least indicative of the existence of a rank like that of Imāmah as conceived of by the Shī'ah.

Leadership of the pious

There remain three places where the word Imām is mentioned in the Qur'an. In one of these three places Allah speaks of the prayer of His exemplary worshippers:

وَالَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا هَبْ لَنَا مِنْ أَزْوَاجِنَا وَذُرِّيَّتِنَا قُرَّةَ أَعْيُنٍ وَاجْعَلْنَا لِلْمُتَّقِينَ إِمَامًا

(They are) those who say: Our Lord, grant us the coolness of (our) eyes in our wives and children, and make us leaders of the pious.¹

This verse speaks of normal people who do not belong to a special class like the Ambiya', asking Allah to make them Imāms, in the sense of paragons of virtue, whose example others would strive to emulate. It is very obvious that it cannot refer to a group of "divinely appointed Imāms", for the reason that the Imāms' elevation to the rank of Imāmah is not on account of their prayers. Since their appointment, like that of the Ambiya', is supposedly divine in origin, it not attainable by any amount of exertion or devotion.

It is interesting to note that this verse proved to be so unpalatable to certain of the early Shī'ah that they declared it to have been corrupted. The following narration appears in the tafsir of 'Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi, the teacher of Abū Ja'far al-Kulayni:

It was read to Abū 'Abdillah (i.e. Imām Ja'far as-Sadiq):

And make us leaders of the pious.

1. al-Furqān : 74

He said: “It would be an enormous thing for them to ask Allah to make them Imāms of the pious.” [The Shī‘ī concept of an Imām is intended, of course, since the Imāms are appointed, and no one can become an Imām by praying for it.]

Someone then enquired:

“How was it then revealed, O son of Rasūlullah?”

He replied: ‘It was revealed:

...and make for us leaders from amongst the pious.¹

This narration, documented in a tafsir of great repute amongst the early tafsihs of the Shī‘ah, (a tafsir, in fact, that is described by its twentieth century editor as being “in reality the commentary of the Imāms al-Baqir and as-Sadiq,”² and each one of whose narrators is regarded as reliable and credible by Shī‘ī hadith experts,³ which vouches for its authenticity by Shī‘ī standards) obviates the need for further discussion around the meaning of the word Imām as it appears in this ayah.

1. *Tafsir* (‘Ali ibn Ibrahim) *al-Qummi* vol.1 p. 10 (ed. Sayyid Tayyib al-Musawi, 2nd edition, Kitabfarosh ‘Allameh, Qum 1968)

2. *ibid.*, editor’s introduction.

3. Abū Talib at-Tajlil at-Tabrizi: *Mu‘jam ath-Thiqat* p. 224 (Mu’assasat an-Nashr al-Islami, Qum 1404AH). In this book the author has compiled a list of all reliable hadith narrators of the Shī‘ah. One of his sources is the tafsir of al-Qummi. In the third chapter of this book he gives a list of the narrators upon whom al-Qummi has relied in narrating the material contained in his tafsir, quoting al-Qummi’s statement in the introduction to his book, that “we will mention and inform about that which reached us, which our mentors and reliable narrators have narrated”. Hethen quotes the author of *Wasa’il ash-Shī‘ah* who states that “‘Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi has testified that his tafsir is narrated from the Imāms by reliable narrators.” (*Wasa’il* vol. 3 p. 524)

On the Day of Judgement

There remains one place in the Qur'an where the word Imām is used. It is in Surah al-Isra' where Allah Ta'ala says:

يَوْمَ نَدْعُوا كُلَّ أُنَاسٍ بِإِمَامِهِمْ ۗ

The day when we will call all people by their leaders.¹

The Imām spoken of in this ayah is recognised by the mufasssirun of the Ahl as-Sunnah as either the book of deeds or the prophet to whose Ummah the person belonged. The first meaning is preferred by Ibn Kathir,² who mentions in support of his preference the ayat where the word Imām was used in the sense of a book (see above). This meaning is further supported by the rest of the ayah:

So those who are given their book in their right hand will read their books.

The second meaning also finds ample support in the Qur'an. In another ayah Allah says:

فَكَيْفَ إِذَا جِئْنَا مِنْ كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ بِشَهِيدٍ وَجِئْنَا بِكَ عَلَىٰ هَؤُلَاءِ شَهِيدًا

How will it be when We bring forth from every Ummah a witness, and bring you (O Muḥammad) as a witness over these?³

From the way in which the position of the Nabi صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ is compared to the position of the “witnesses” of the other Ummahs we can only conclude that the reference is to the Ambiya. It therefore follows that those Ummahs will be called by the names of their Ambiya. Calling the Ummahs of the past by the names of the Ambiya who were sent to them is further a common thing in both the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The 'Ad, for example, are commonly referred to as “the people of Hud”, just like

1. al-Isra' : 71

2. *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* vol. 3 p. 52 (Maktabah Dār at-Turath, Cairo n.d.)

3. an-Nisa':41

Banu Isra'il are called "the people of Musa". Identifying the Imām mentioned in the ayah under discussion with the Ambiya is therefore warranted by both the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

As for the claim of the Shī'ah that it refers to the Twelve Imāms,¹ this claim not only lacks Qur'anic support, it also curtails the general scope of the ayah. The lack of Qur'anic support is evident from the above discussion on the usage of the word Imām in the Qur'an. The restriction of the general scope of the ayah arises from the chronological disparity between the times when the Twelve Imāms lived, and the periods during which previous Ummahs flourished. If we say that all Ummahs will be called by the names of the Twelve Imāms, then what about the Ummahs that existed before them? By whose name will they be called? After all, the ayah says that all people will be called by their leaders.

In addition, when for argument's sake we do assume that the reference is to the Twelve Imāms, we are left with a somewhat incongruous situation. Sayyidunā 'Ali, the first of the Twelve Imāms, died in the year 40. His son Sayyidunā Hasan died nine years later, in 49. If Sayyidunā 'Ali is the Imām for the people of his time, Sayyidunā Hasan is left with only those people who were born during his nine years. All the other people of his time who were alive during his father's time will form part of his father's group, and not his. The tenure of the 3rd Imām lasted for 22 years; the 4th for 34 years; the 5th for 19 years; the 6th for 34 years; the 7th for 35 years; the 8th for 20 years; the 9th for 17 years; the 10th for 34 years; and the 11th for only 6 years. Suddenly, with the 12th Imām, the Awaited Mahdi, we have a tenure of Imāmah that has been running for over 1200 years. The group that will supposedly be called by the name of the 11th Imām, for example, will only include people that were born during his Imāmah that ran from 254 up to 260, while the numbers of those who will be called by the name of the 12th Imām will be practically incalculable.

Compare this incongruous scenario with the much more orderly and Qur'anic system of having the various Ummahs called by the names of their Ambiya on the Day of

1. In the first volume of *al-Kafi* this ayah is used thrice in relation to the Imāms.

Qiyamah, and the absurdity of using the 71st ayah of Surah al-Isra' to substantiate the doctrine of Imāmah as conceived of by the Shī'ah will be fully exposed. There can be no question that the word Imām in this ayah does not refer to the Twelve Imāms.

SUMMARY

We have discussed here each and every place in the Qur'an where the word Imām and its plural A'immah were used in the Qur'an. It was demonstrated how Allah Ta'ala used this word to refer variously to

- a book (thrice)
- the Champions of Kufr (twice)
- a road (once)
- the leaders of the Israelites
- the leaders of the Pious
- the Prophets or the Book

Any attempt by the Shī'ah to identify their idiosyncratic notion of Imāmah with the Imāmah of the Qur'an is totally incongruous. The closest they could come to it would be to draw a similarity between their own Imāmah and the leadership of the Israelites. However, such a similarity is immediately rejected when one considers that this leadership of the Israelites is clearly identified in the Qur'an with the Ambiya of Bani Isra'il. The Qur'an provides no grounds whatsoever to identify this leadership of the Israelites with anyone but the Ambiya. It is not uncommon to find the Shī'ah quoting verses such as the 5th verse of Surah al-Qasas to substantiate their belief of Imāmah. If they only took the trouble of reading the verse in its proper context, without adding to it the excrescences of their own theology, they will see just how far fetched their identification of Qur'anic Imāmah with Shī'ī Imāmah really is. In *al-Qasas:5* for example, the reference is clearly to Musa and his people. Just how, one wonders, is that verse extended to Ali ibn Abi Talib and eleven persons from his progeny?

The attempt to draw a comparison between the Qur’anic Leadership of the Pious and the Imāmah of the Shī’ah is similarly fraught with problems. It has been seen above how this form of leadership is a favour sought from Allah by His ideal servants. The Imāmah of the Shī’ah of the Shī’ah, on the other hand, is like Nubuwwah, divinely granted, and cannot be aspired to by any person. The utter lack of harmony between this form of leadership and Shī’ī Imāmah is nowhere more clearly brought to light than in the authentically narrated saying of Imām Ja‘far as-Sadiq which points at the corruption of the text of the Qur’an at the hands of the Ṣaḥābah رضي الله عنهم as the reason for the disparity.

The only other Qur’anic meaning of the word Imām left to the Shī’ah is the one which refers to the Day of Qiyamah, when nations will be called by their “Imāms”. Is it possible that the word “Imām” here could be referring to the Shī’ī concept of Imāmah? Unfortunately for the Shī’ah, once again that is not possible. It is not possible for two reasons:

Firstly, because a holistic reading of the immediately following verses, as well as of other verses of the Qur’an point unmistakably to the fact that the Imāmah spoken of here refers either to the Ambiya, by whose names nations are called not only in the Hereafter, but in the Qur’an and Sunnah too, or to their books of deeds by which they will be called to account.

Secondly, because identifying the verse with the Shī’ī concept of Imāmah leads to a very problematic distribution of nations for the various Imāms.

In conclusion, in the usage of the word “Imām” in the Qur’an there is nothing whatsoever to support the belief of Imāmah as conceived of by the Shī’ah.

