

The Qur'ān and Imāmah

by:

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(May Allah have Mercy on him)

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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	

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There is no gainsaying that of all differences that exist between the Ahl al-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 Sunnī-Shī'ī 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'īs and Sunnīs closer to one another can afford to ignore the doctrine of Imāmah. All endeavours aimed at removing the barriers that separate the Ahl al-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 Sunnī-Shī'ī 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'ān, with the purpose of ascertaining whether this doctrine as conceived of and believed in by the Ithnā 'Asharī (or Ja'farī) 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'ān.

Essentially, Imāmah is about leadership of the Ummah after the demise of Rasūlullāh 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 رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهُ. He was succeeded by his eldest son Ḥasan, and he by his brother Ḥusayn. After Ḥusayn the Imāmah continued in his progeny until the year 260 AH, when the twelfth Imām, a child of five, disappeared upon the death of his father. He is believed to be the Awaited Mahdī who will return from Occultation to establish justice upon the earth. To these twelve men from amongst the family of Rasūlullāh 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'ālā 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 Ḥusayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭā', who was the most prominent Shī'ī scholar of Najaf in Iraq during the seventies, writes in his book *Aṣl al-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

It is interesting to note that the book from which this statement is drawn was written for the express purpose of correcting contemporary misconceptions

1 *Aṣl al-Shī'ah wa-Uṣūlūhā*, p. 58 (Mu'assasat al-'Alamī, Beirut).

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 رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهُ should cast the likes of Abū Bakr, 'Umar and the rest of the Ṣaḥābah رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهُمْ 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 murtad after the death of Rasūlullāh, 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 al-Sunnah in general. One would expect them to say about the Ahl al-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,” Sunnīs who do not believe in the Imāmah of the Twelve Imāms must also be unbelievers. There have been many scholars 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 al-Sunnah—unbelievers. For example, Ibn Bābuwayh al-Qummī (died 381 AH), the author of one of the four canonical ḥadīth collections of the Shī'ah, *Man Lā Yaḥḍurhu al-Faqīh*, 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 Amīr al-Mu'minīn (Sayyidunā 'Alī) and the Imāms after him that he is the same as one who rejects the Nubuwwah of the Ambiyā'.

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

It is our belief concerning a person who accepts (the Imāmah of) Amīr al-Mu'minīn but rejects any one of the Imāms after him, that he is similar to one who believes in all the Ambiyā' but rejects the Nubuwwah of Muḥammad ﷺ. The Nabī ﷺ said: "The Imāms after me are twelve. The first is Amīr al-Mu'minīn 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the last is the Qā'im (the Mahdī). 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 Nabī 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 al-Ṣādiq said: "Whoever doubts the kufr of our enemies is himself a Kāfir."¹

His student Shaykh Mufīd (died 413 AH) writes:

There is consensus amongst the Imāmīyyah (the Ithnā 'Asharī or Ja'farī Shī'ah) that whoever denies the Imāmah of any one of the Imāms, and denies the duty of obedience to them that Allah has decreed, that such a person is a kāfir, misguided, and that he deserves everlasting torment in Hell.²

The prolific Abū Ja'far al-Ṭūsī, called Shaykh al-Ṭā'ifāh, (died 460 AH), who is the author of two of the four canonical ḥadīth collections, has the following to say:

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

The mujaddid of Shī'ism in the eighth century after the Hījah, Ibn Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī (died 726 AH) expresses similar sentiments in the following terms:

1 *Risālat al-I'tiqād*, p. 111-114, quoted by al-Majlisī: *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 27 p. 62 (Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, Tehran, 1387).

2 *Al-Masā'il*, quoted in *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 8 p. 366.

3 *Talkhīṣ al-Shaḥīḥ*, vol. 4 p. 131 (Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, Qum, 3rd ed. 1394).

Imāmah is a universal grace (*luṭf ‘ām*) while Nubuwwah is a special grace (*luṭf khāṣ*), because it is possible that a specific period in time can be void of a living Nabī, 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 Shī‘ah, and if seen from the angle of consistency, it is a commendable position indeed. Yet, if one has to ask the Shī‘ah of today (especially recent converts to Shī‘ism) whether they believe Sunnīs are Muslims or not, they will respond with surprise, and might even appear grieved at such a question. As far as recent converts to Shī‘ism 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 Shī‘ism will know that in the eyes of the Shī‘ah a distinction is made between a Muslim and a Mu‘min. All those who profess Islam outwardly are Muslims: Sunnīs, Zaydīs, Mu‘tazilīs, and all other sects. A Mu‘min, however, is only he who believes in the Twelve Imāms. By this clever ruse the fuqahā of the Shī‘ah 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 Sunnīs and others, which facilitates proselytisation for them. On the other hand, by the subtle measure of distinguishing Muslim from Mu‘min, 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 Mu‘mins are those to whom salvation in the Hereafter belongs exclusively, and that depends upon belief in the Twelve Imāms. This distinction between Muslim and Mu‘min can be found throughout classical Shī‘ī literature. The seventh century faqīh, Yaḥyā ibn Sa‘īd al-Ḥillī (died 690 AH), for example writes in his manual on fiqh, *al-Jāmi‘ lī al-Sharā‘i*:

1 *Al-Alfayn*, p. 3 (al-Maktabah al-Haydāriyyah, Najaf, 3rd ed. 1388).

It is correct for a Muslim to make an endowment (waqf) upon Muslims. Muslims are those who utter the two shahādahs, and their children. But if a person makes something waqf upon the Mu'minīn, it will be exclusively for the Imāmīyah 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, *Tahrīr al-Wasīlah*, he states:

If a person makes a waqf upon the Muslims it will be for all those who confess the two shahādahs ... If an Imāmī makes a waqf upon the Mu'minīn it will be restricted to the Ithnā 'Asharīyah.²

Some amongst the contemporary spokesmen for Shī'ism, like Kāshif al-Ghiṭā', 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 Sunnīs as Muslims, it is in strict reference to worldly matters. In eschatological matters, matters of the Hereafter, Sunnīs who do not believe in the Imāmah of the Twelve Imāms are just like Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus or any other rejectors of the Nubuwwah of Rasūlullāh ﷺ. The only reason for saying that Sunnīs are Muslims is expedience and convenience. Without professing such an opinion, the Shī'ah would have had to

1 *Al-Jāmi' lī al-Sharā'i'*, p. 371 (Mu'assasat Sayyid al-Shuhada' al-'Ilmiyyah, Qum, 1405).

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

3 *Aṣl al-Shī'ah wa-Uṣūlūhā*, p. 58-59.

retreat into seclusion and bear ostracism from the rest of the Muslim world. This reason is given by Sayyid ‘Abd Allāh Shubbar (died 1232 AH) in his commentary of *al-Ziyārat al-Jāmi‘ah*, the comprehensive du‘ā read at the graves of the Imāms. At the point where the ziyārah reads:

Whoever denies you is a kāfir,

he comments upon it, saying:

There are many narrations that indicate that the opponents are kāfir. 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 kāfir, 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 Ambiyā’, 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”: *Biḥār al-Anwār* of ‘Allāmah Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (died 1111 AH), 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-Islām in Isfahan, capital of the Safawids, and even to this day his works 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 *al-Anwār al-Lami‘ah Sharḥ al-Ziyārat al-Jāmi‘ah* p. 176 (Mu‘assasat al-Bi‘thah, Mashhad, 1st ed. 1457).

1. The Imāms possess more knowledge than the Ambiyā'. (13 narrations)¹
2. The Imāms are superior to the Ambiyā' and the entire creation. The Covenant of the Imāms was taken from them (the Ambiyā'), the Malā'ikah and the entire creation. The (major prophets called) ulul-'Azm (Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm, Mūsā and 'Īsā) attained the status of ulul-'Azm on account of loving the Imāms. (88 narrations)²
3. The du'ās of the Ambiyā' were answered because they invoked the wasīlah 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 Ambiyā'. (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

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

1 *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 26 p. 194-200.

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

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

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

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

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

the repositories of every branch of knowledge and perfection possessed by the Ambiyā'. The existence of the world depends upon their presence. They are the intermediaries upon whose intercession acceptance of the prayers of even the Ambiyā' 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-Islāmiyyah*, 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'ān? Surely a belief of such momentousness, an article of faith with such far reaching consequences, that supercedes even belief in the Ambiyā', must be rooted in the Qur'ān, the book which was revealed by Allah:

تَبَيَّنَّا لَكُلِّ 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.

Imāmah and Prophethood in the Qur'ān

In this article we investigate the Qur'ānic 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'ān, we will investigate whether the Qur'ān provides any basis for the doctrine of Imāmah as formulated in Shī'ite theology. In limiting our investigation

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

2 Sūrah al-Naḥl: 89.

to the Qur’ān, 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’ān. After all, the “secondary” issue of Nubuwwah finds more than ample support in the pages of the Qur’ān. No one, after reading the clear and unambiguous Qur’ānic texts wherein Allah makes mention of His Messengers and Prophets, their status,

وَكَلَّا 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

وَأَنْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأُ إِبْرَاهِيمَ

*And recite to them the story of Ibrāhīm.*³

نَحْنُ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ أَحْسَنَ الْقَصَصِ

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

the explicit mention of their names,

وَتِلْكَ حُجَّتُنَا آتَيْنَاهَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ عَلَى قَوْمِهِ نَرْفَعُ دَرَجَاتٍ مَن نَّشَاءُ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ حَكِيمٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٨٣﴾ وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ إِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ ۚ كُلًّا هَدَيْنَا ۚ وَنُوحًا هَدَيْنَا مِن قَبْلُ ۚ وَمِن دُرِّيَّتِهِ دَاوُدَ وَسُلَيْمَانَ وَأَيُّوبَ وَيُوسُفَ وَمُوسَى وَ

1 Sūrah al-An’ām : 86.

2 Sūrah Tāhā : 9.

3 Sūrah al-Shu’arā : 69.

4 Sūrah Yūsuf : 4.

هُرُونَ ۖ وَكَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾ وَزَكَرِيَّا وَيَحْيَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَإِيلَىٰ ۖ كُلٌّ مِّنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿٨٥﴾
وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَالْيَسَعَ وَيُونُسَ وَلُوطًا ۖ وَكُلًّا فَضَّلْنَا عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ

Such was the argument we gave Ibrāhīm against his people. We raise in degree whomsoever We will, and your Lord is Wise, All-Knowing. We gave him Ishāq and Ya‘qūb; each of them We guided. And before that, We guided Nūh, and among his (Ibrāhīm’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) Zakariyyā, and Yaḥyā, and ‘Īsā, and Ilyās; all of them of the Righteous. And Ismā‘īl, and Alyasa‘, 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’ān 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 ‘Asharī Shī‘ah teaches, it would be only reasonable to expect that the Qur’ān 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’ān.

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’ān. From the way Allah has used the word in the Qur’ān it will then be seen whether the Shī‘ī concept of Imāmah that has been explained above, finds any sort of Qur’ānic support.

1 Sūrah al-An‘ām : 83-86.

2 Sūrah al-Nisā’ : 136.

A book

The word Imām recurs 7 times in the Qur’ān, 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 Mūsā, a guide and a mercy.¹

وَمِنْ قَبْلِهِ كِتَابُ مُوسَى إِمَامًا وَرَحْمَةً ط

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

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ وَنَكْتُبُ مَا قَدَّمُوا وَآثَارَهُمْ ط وَكُلَّ شَيْءٍ أَحْصَيْنَاهُ فِي إِمَامٍ مُّبِينٍ

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 أئِمَّةَ الْكُفْرِ

Fight the leaders of kufr.⁴

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أئِمَّةً يَدْعُونَ إِلَى النَّارِ ء

And We made them leaders who call towards the Fire.⁵

1 Sūrah Hūd : 17.

2 Sūrah al-Aḥqāf : 12.

3 Sūrah Yāsīn : 12.

4 Sūrah al-Tawbah : 12.

5 Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ : 41.

A road

One reference is to a clearly discernible road:

وَأَنَّهُمَا لِبَآئِمَامٍ مُّبِينٍ

And verily, the two (cities) lie next to a clear road.¹

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 Sūrah al-Ambiyā' it is stated:

قُلْنَا يَا نَارُ 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 أُمَّةً يَهْتَدُونَ 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 Ibrāhīm." And they planned against him; but We made them the greater losers. And We delivered him and Lūṭ to the land which We blessed for the nations. And We gave him Ishāq, and Ya'qūb 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.²

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 Ambiyā' as the leaders of men, who guide them towards Allah. This unequivocal identification of a'immah as Ambiyā' leads us to conclude that the reference in Surah al-Sajdah too, is to the Ambiyā', and not to any other category of men:

1 Sūrah al-Ḥijr : 79.

2 Sūrah al-Ambiyā' : 69-73.

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ فَلَا تَكُنْ فِي مِرْيَةٍ مِّنْ لِّقَاتِهِ وَجَعَلْنَاهُ هُدًى لِّبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ ﴿٢٣﴾ وَجَعَلْنَا مِنْهُمْ أُمَّةً
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 Isrā'īl. 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 Ambiyā', 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:

وَنُرِيدُ أَنْ نَمُنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتُضِعُوا 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 Nabī Mūsā and the other prophet-kings of Banī Isrā'īl, like Nabī Dāwūd and Nabī Sulayman عَلَيْهِ السَّلَام, that the leadership referred to in this verse, came to be vested. If at times they were ruled by men other than the Ambiyā', the status of those leaders was never seen to be superior to the rank of the Ambiyā'. Verses like the above three, apart from dealing specifically with the Ambiyā' of Banī Isrā'īl, are not in the least indicative of the existence of a rank like that of Imāmah as conceived of by the Shī'ah.

1 Sūrah al-Sajdah : 23-24.

2 Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ : 5.

Leadership of the Pious

There remain three places where the word Imām is mentioned in the Qur’ān. 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 Ambiyā’, 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 Ambiyā’, 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 *tafsīr* of ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, the teacher of Abū Ja’far al-Kulaynī:

It was read to Abū ‘Abd Allāh (i.e. Imām Ja’far al-Şādiq):

And make us leaders of the pious.

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.]

1 Sūrah al-Furqān : 74.

Someone then enquired:

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

He replied: It was revealed:

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

This narration, documented in a tafsīr of great repute amongst the early tafsīrs of the Shī'ah, (a tafsīr, in fact, that is described by its twentieth century editor as being “in reality the commentary of the Imāms al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq,”² and each one of whose narrators is regarded as reliable and credible by Shī'ī ḥadīth 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 āyah.

On the Day of Judgement

There remains one place in the Qur'ān where the word Imām is used. It is in Sūrah al-Isrā' where Allah Ta'ālā says:

يَوْمَ نَدْعُوا كُلَّ اِنْسَانٍ بِاِمَامِهِمْ

*The day when we will call all people by their leaders.*⁴

1. *Tafsīr ('Alī ibn Ibrāhīm) al-Qummī*, vol. 1 p. 10 (ed. Sayyid Ṭayyib al-Mūsawī, 2nd edition, Kitabfarosh 'Allameh, Qum, 1968)

2. *ibid.*, editor's introduction.

3. Abū Ṭālib at-Tajlīl at-Tabrizi: *Mu'jam al-Thiqāt* p. 224 (Mu'assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, Qum 1404 AH). In this book the author has compiled a list of all reliable ḥadīth narrators of the Shī'ah. One of his sources is the *Tafsīr* of al-Qummī. In the third chapter of this book he gives a list of the narrators upon whom al-Qummī has relied in narrating the material contained in his *tafsīr*, quoting al-Qummī'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”. He then quotes the author of *Wasā'il al-Shī'ah* who states that “Alī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī has testified that his *tafsīr* is narrated from the Imāms by reliable narrators.” (*Wasā'il* vol. 3 p. 524).

4. Sūrah al-Isrā' : 71.

The Imām spoken of in this āyah is recognised by the Mufasssirūn of the Ahl al-Sunnah as either the book of deeds or the prophet to whose Ummah the person belonged. The first meaning is preferred by Ibn Kathīr,¹ who mentions in support of his preference the āyat where the word Imām was used in the sense of a book (see above). This meaning is further supported by the rest of the āyah:

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’ān. In another āyah, 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?*²

From the way in which the position of the Nabī ﷺ is compared to the position of the “witnesses” of the other Ummahs we can only conclude that the reference is to the Ambiyā’. It therefore follows that those Ummahs will be called by the names of their Ambiyā’. Calling the Ummahs of the past by the names of the Ambiyā’ who were sent to them is further a common thing in both the Qur’ān and the Sunnah. The ‘Ād, for example, are commonly referred to as “the people of Hūd”, just like Banū Isrā’īl are called “the people of Mūsā”. Identifying the Imām mentioned in the āyah under discussion with the Ambiyā’ is therefore warranted by both the Qur’ān and the Sunnah.

As for the claim of the Shī’ah that it refers to the Twelve Imāms,³ this claim not only lacks Qur’ānic support, it also curtails the general scope of the āyah. The lack of Qur’ānic support is evident from the above discussion on the usage of the word Imām in the Qur’ān. The restriction of the general scope of the āyah arises from the

1 *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, vol. 3 p. 52 (Maktabah Dār al-Turāth, Cairo n.d.).

2 Sūrah al-Nisā’: 41.

3 In the first volume of *al-Kāfi* this āyah is used thrice in relation to the Imāms.

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 āyah 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 the Twelve Imāms, we are left with a somewhat incongruous situation. Sayyidunā 'Alī, the first of the Twelve Imāms, died in the year 40. His son Sayyidunā Ḥasan died nine years later, in 49. If Sayyidunā 'Alī is the Imām for the people of his time, Sayyidunā Ḥasan 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 Mahdī, 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'ānic system of having the various Ummahs called by the names of their Ambiyā' on the Day of Qiyamah, and the absurdity of using the 71st āyah of Surah al-Isrā' 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 āyah does not refer to the Twelve Imāms.

SUMMARY

We have discussed here each and every place in the Qur'ān where the word Imām and its plural A'immah were used in the Qur'ān. It was demonstrated how Allah Ta'ālā 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'ān 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'ān with the Ambiyā' of Banī Isrā'īl. The Qur'ān provides no grounds whatsoever to identify this leadership of the Israelites with anyone but the Ambiyā'. It is not uncommon to find the Shī'ah quoting verses such as the 5th verse of Surah al-Qaṣaṣ 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'ānic Imāmah with Shī'ī Imāmah really is. In *al-Qaṣaṣ: 5* for example, the reference is clearly to Mūsā and his people. Just how, one wonders, is that verse extended to 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and eleven persons from his progeny?

The attempt to draw a comparison between the Qur'ānic 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, 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 al-Ṣādiq which points at the corruption of the text of the Qur'ān at the hands of the Ṣaḥābah رضي الله عنهم as the reason for the disparity.

The only other Qur'ānic meaning of the word Imām left to the Shī'ah is the one which refers to the Day of Qiyāmah, 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'ān point unmistakably to the fact that the Imāmah spoken of here refers either to the Ambiyā', by whose names nations are called not only in the Hereafter, but in the Qur'ān 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'ān there is nothing whatsoever to support the belief of Imāmah as conceived of by the Shī'ah.