

Imām ‘Alī al-Riḍā and Imāmāh

The further we have delved into the development of Shī‘ism the more evident its falsehood has become. When a fundamental tenet is beset with such disagreement and confusion, then one can well imagine the state of secondary and supplementary aspects of that religion.

The doctrine of Imāmāh is plagued with such religious, historic, and logical inconsistencies which brings to mind the condition of the Yahūd after the ascension of Nabī ‘Īsā; their confusion and subsequent theories which emerged:

وَإِنَّ الَّذِينَ اِخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ لَفِي شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ ۚ مَا هُمْ بِهِ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِلَّا اتِّبَاعَ الظَّنِّ

And indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of assumption.¹

If Imāmāh were truly revealed by Allah it would have been free from such division and confusion, as Allah states:

وَلَوْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ لَوَجَدُوا فِيهِ اخْتِلَافًا كَثِيرًا

If it had been from [any] other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction.²

A condition which has haunted the Shī‘ah from the beginning to end.

The Shī‘ah were still reeling from the crisis it had faced after the death of Ja‘far, confusion over which of his sons, Ismā‘īl, Muḥammad, ‘Abd Allāh, or Kāẓim was the Imām; and the majority defecting to the Zaydis or Ḥasanids; this crisis had hardly settled when they were beset by yet another problem.

Imām Mūsā Kāẓim—who had become the popular candidate for the Mahdī among his followers—passed away under mysterious circumstances in the year 183 A.H, leaving the Shī‘ah utterly perplexed.

Thus some claimed that he was the Mahdī who had not died but went into occultation, others that he had died but will return, and others went as far as comparing him to Nabī ‘Īsā. Yet another group decided to surrender entirely and deferred any judgement on the matter. They are referred to as the Wāqifiyyah.

The main reason for their halting the line of Imāmāh at Mūsā Kāẓim—and refusing to accept the Imāmāh of his son after him—were the narrations widely circulated regarding the Mahdism of al-Kāẓim,³ which the Ahl al-Bayt tried their level best to refute. Ibrāhīm ibn Mūsā al-Kāẓim is on record saying these profound words on learning about this:

¹ Sūrah al-Nisā’: 157.

² Sūrah al-Nisā’: 82.

³ Kitāb al-Ghaybah, p. 29-40.

He said, “Glory be to Allah! The Messenger of Allah passed away but Mūsā will not die? By Allah he has passed away and the Messenger of Allah has also passed away.”⁴

Providing us with a comprehensive response to any and all claims—past, present, and future—of a hidden Mahdī having extended lifespan and being spared from death.

Those Shī'ah who did not subscribe to the Mahdī theory sought other candidates to rally around, and so the *Imām Wars* began!

1. Shī'ahs in Madinah pledged allegiance to Aḥmad, the son of Mūsā al-Kāzīm, and he took the oath of allegiance from them.

2. 'Alī ibn 'Ubayd Allāh ibn Ḥasan ibn 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn,

3. 'Abd Allāh ibn Mūsā al-Kāzīm,

4. Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Ḥasan al-Muthannā.

These three received support of the Shī'ah in their respective cities and elsewhere, in their struggle to overthrow the unjust rule of the Abbasids. Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm also received the support and allegiance of the people of Kūfah.⁵

5. On the death of Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm, the Shī'ah pledged their allegiance to Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Zayd—who was able to gain control of a number of cities due to the support he enjoyed. And in a short time he managed to take control of Iraq, Hijaz, and Yemen. Even the people of Syria had announced their support for him.⁶

However, this movement collapsed in the year 200 A.H, when the Abbasid armies regained control over these different cities.

6. Muḥammad ibn Ja'far al-Ṣādiq then took up the flag, the majority of the Shī'ah allying with him as opposed to al-Riḍā. It is recorded in *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyīn*:

During this period, Muḥammad ibn Ja'far ibn Muḥammad rose up in Madinah and called people to pledge allegiance to him. The people of Madinah pledged allegiance to him as the Amir al-Mu'minīn and they did not make such a pledge after Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī except to Muḥammad ibn Ja'far.⁷

This further emphasizes our objective: that let alone the Shī'ah the Ahl al-Bayt themselves did not believe in the divine authority of the Twelve Imāms.

One might ask:

Where was al-Riḍā in all of this?

Was he not the divinely appointed Imām upon whom the salvation of Man is dependent?

⁴ *Al-Kāfi*, vol. 1, p. 39.

⁵ *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyīn*, p. 532.

⁶ *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyīn*, p. 534.

⁷ *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyīn*, p. 444.

The statements and actions of al-Riḍā uproots this doctrine entirely.

In 201 A.H Ma'mūn al-Rashīd—the Mu'tazilī Abbasid Khalīfah—declared 'Alī al-Riḍā to be the best of the Alawites and offered to abdicate the Khilāfah in his favour. But 'Alī al-Riḍā refuses!

Yes—after years of Shī'ah struggle to return the “usurped” right to the infallible Imāms—the Imām refuses to accept the post. This action alone entirely annihilates the entire Twelver Shi'i doctrine. However, if one is looking for the proverbial cherry on the cake; then continue to read...

When 'Alī al-Riḍā refused to accept the post of Khilāfah, Ma'mūn insisted on him being the crown prince and his successor—which al-Riḍā accepts only if his own conditions are met. Contrary to what one may expect, al-Riḍā's condition has absolutely nothing to do with Shī'ī theology or its tenets; instead it flies directly in the face of everything the Shī'ah would have us believe. Al-Mufīd records the conversation between Ma'mūn and al-Riḍā in his *Kitāb al-Irshād*, when the latter offered him the Khilāfah:

Al-Riḍā replied, “Allāh! Allāh!” Amīr al-Mu'minīn, I have no ability or power for that.”

Ma'mūn said, “Then I will designate you as successor after me.”

Al-Riḍā said, “Amir al-Mu'minīn, exempt me from that.”

Finally upon insistence, Al-Riḍā accepts saying:

I will agree to what you want of me as far as succession is concerned, on condition that I do not command, nor order, nor give legal decisions, nor judge, nor appoint, nor dismiss, nor change anything from how it is at present.⁸

Effectively surrendering everything Divine Imāmah is supposed to entail.

While the actions of 'Alī al-Riḍā contradict the popular Shī'ī tale of the oppressed Imāms denied their divine right to rule, it is in perfect harmony with the Sunnī narrative and their opinion of the Imāms. Supporting this even further is the narration reported from 'Alī al-Riḍā in which he discusses the doctrine of Shurā in more explicit terms:

Al-Riḍā said, “Anyone who wants to divide the community and usurp the right of the Ummah, and to make someone a leader not through consultation (Shurā); Kill him! For Allah has permitted that.”⁹

This reveals Imām 'Alī al-Riḍā's true political theory, which is in accordance with the general opinion of the Ahl al-Bayt. It emphasizes the right of the Ummah for consultation and their right to choose the Khalīfah.

⁸ *Kitāb al-Irshād*, (eng) p. 440.

⁹ *Uyūn Akhbār al-Riḍā*, vol, 2, p. 62.

This reconciliation between the Abbasid and Alawid house was not met with approval by the Shī'ah commonality and they continued to rally around anyone who sought to overthrow the Mu'tazilī Abbasid Khalīfah.

7. Thus while al-Riḍā was reconciling with Ma'mūn, his brother Ibrāhīm ibn Mūsā—who had previously joined the rebellion of Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm—refused to submit, and insisted on keeping control of Yemen. Ma'mūn was eventually forced to recognize him and remove his own governor.

8. In the year 202 A.H, the Shī'ah rallied around 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, and a new Shī'ah rebellion began; but this time in new circumstances. The rebellion began after the reconciliation between Ma'mūn and al-Riḍā, and this time against an Alawid governor, 'Abbās ibn Mūsā al-Kāzim—brother of al-Riḍā—who invited the people of Kūfah to pledge allegiance to Ma'mūn and his crown prince, 'Alī al-Riḍā. But the people of Kūfah refused to do so, they said:

If you call us to Ma'mūn then after him to your brother, we are not in need of your call. But if you call us to your brother **or some people among the Ahl al-Bayt or yourself**; we will accept and follow you.¹⁰

The polarity between the Ahl al-Bayt and those who claim to be their followers is clearly noticeable, the leader and best of the Ahl al-Bayt calls to one thing yet the Shi'ah **demand** something else entirely. The attitude of the people of Kūfah during this period is also highlighted, the concept of divine Imāmah as asserted by the Twelvers being particularly absent. Rather they were prepared to follow anyone from the Ahl al-Bayt, whether it be al-Riḍā, his brother 'Abbās, or even his cousin 'Alī ibn Muḥammad. They did not limit leadership and authority to only a select twelve believed to be divinely appointed.

Nonetheless, even if we were to ignore all of these historic narrations and assume—contrary to reality—that all of the Shī'ah unanimously believed in the Imāmah of al-Riḍā and for the first time came to some albeit shaky consensus; then whatever consensus might have been reached was once again fragmented on the death of Ali al-Riḍā... as the Shī'ah were about to face a crisis like never before.

¹⁰ Ṭabarī, vol, 7 p. 144.