

Conceptual Foundations of Shi'i Islam

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The division of the community of Islam into Sunni and Shi'i branches has commonly been explained in terms of purely political differences. Its origins have been attributed to basically political partisanship with regard to the leadership of the Umma, a partisanship which later exploded into conflict in the civil war between 'Ali and Mu'awiya.

This war not only established the Umayyads in power, but also supposedly marked the advent of Shi'ism as a religious movement divergent from the main body of believers. Such an interpretation grossly oversimplifies a very complex situation.

Those who thus emphasize the political nature of Shi'ism are perhaps too eager to project the modern Western notion of the separation of church and state back into seventh century Arabian society, where such a notion would be not only foreign, but completely unintelligible. Such an approach also implies the spontaneous appearance of Shi'ism rather than its gradual emergence and development within Islamic society.

The recent occidental conception of "a purely spiritual movement" is exceptional. Throughout most of human history religion has been intimately involved in the whole life of man in society, and not least in his politics. Even the purely religious teaching of Jesus-as it is commonly regarded-is not without its political relevance.^[1]

Just as the Prophet was basically a religious and spiritual teacher and messenger and, at the same time, due to the circumstances, a temporal ruler and statesman, Islam has been since its very birth both a religious discipline and, so to speak, a socio-political movement. It is basically religious because of the status Muhammad attained as the Apostle of God appointed and sent by Him to deliver His message to mankind, and political because of the environment and circumstances in which it arose and grew.

Likewise Shi'ism, in its inherent nature, has always been both religious and political, and these co-existing aspects are found side by side throughout its history. It is therefore difficult to speak, at any stage of its existence, about the "political" Shi'a as distinct from the "religious" one. Throughout the first three or four centuries of Islamic religious and institutional development, one cannot fail to see that all religious discussions among Muslims had both political and social relevance.

When we analyse different possible relations which the religious beliefs and the political constitution in Islam bear to one another, we find the claims and the doctrinal trends of the

supporters of 'Ali more inclined towards the religious aspects than the political ones; thus it seems paradoxical that the party whose claims were based chiefly on spiritual and religious considerations, as we shall examine in detail presently, should be traditionally labelled as political in origin.

The term Shi'a, keeping in view its historical development, must strictly be taken throughout this chapter in its literal meaning as followers, party, group, associates, partisans, or in a rather looser sense, the "supporters".^[2] In these meanings the word Shi'a occurs a number of times in the Qur'an.^[3]

In its applied meaning as a particular designation for the followers of 'Ali and the people of his house, and thereby a distinct denomination within Islam against the Sunni, the term Shi'a was a later usage. In the infant years of Islamic history, one cannot speak of the so-called "orthodox" Sunna and the "heretical" Shi'a, but rather only of two ill-defined points of view that were nevertheless drifting steadily, and finally irreconcilably, further apart.

With this meaning of the term Shi'a in mind, our main purpose here is to trace the background of this support to 'Ali and to investigate its origins in the Arabian society of the day in the midst of which Islam arose. Consequently it will be illustrated how this attitude became manifest as early as the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

The starting point in any study of Shi'a Islam must, by historical necessity, be the nature and composition of the Muslim community which emerged at Medina under the leadership of Muhammad. This community was homogeneous neither in cultural background and traditions nor in politico-social institutions. The unification of different people or groups of people in a new system does not imply a complete elimination or even a change in some of their deep-rooted values and traditions.

It was therefore natural that certain values, ideas, and inclinations of different component parts of the Umma should reflect themselves in certain aspects of the new religious order. Consequently, rather than a homogeneous approach to all issues, especially of a non-fundamental nature, one must expect to find in the Umma a multiplicity of approaches and points of view, with the acceptance of Muhammad and his mission being the fundamental factor binding the various groups together.

The inclination of some of the Arabs from among the Companions of the Prophet to support 'Ali was thus a natural corollary of the already existing ideas prevalent among the various Arab tribes who together constituted Muhammad's Umma at Medina.

This Umma consisted of the Meccans, both from the Quraysh al-Bitah (those who inhabited the district immediately around the Ka'ba) and Quraysh az-Zawahir (those whose quarters

were in the outskirts); of Medinese, who were divided into Aws and Khazraj, both tribes of the South Arabian stock and still preserving many of the characteristics of their original land; of the desert Arabs surrounding Med ma; and even of some Arabs and non- Arabs from distant places, such as Bilal of Abyssinia and Salman of Persia.

All of them together formed a common society under Islam, but when we consider a problem common among them we have to take into consideration the different temperaments and inclinations of each group, and not those of only one single people, group, or locality. We must presume that the Arabs of different origins and socio-cultural backgrounds understood Islam, at least in its early stage, according to their own social and moral ideas.

Arab society, both nomadic and sedentary, was organized on a tribal basis, and of all the social bonds, loyalty to the tribe (al-'asabiya) was considered the most important. This feeling of al-'asabiya, along with other aspects of tribal life, provides the most emphatic expression of and a constant theme for pre-Islamic poetry.

The tribal system was based on the actual^[4] or fictitious descent from a common ancestor through whom the social and moral status of the members of the tribe was determined. People who could not boast of their ancestors as a symbol of greatness were of little social standing and often subject to contempt.

Knowledge and awareness of the common ancestor was therefore the central point in Arab social consciousness, and honour and glory of a tribe in comparison with any other tribe consisted of the honour and glory of its ancestors. Any claim to prestige and honour of the individual members as well as the whole tribe was perhaps exclusively dependent on that of the ancestors.

The word used for such claims is hasab, which is commonly explained by the Arab philologists in the meaning of enumeration of the famous deeds of ancestors. This does not mean that the word hasab excludes the enumeration of those ancestors themselves who figure in the genealogical tree in both paternal and maternal descent.^[5]

If the noble deeds of one's ancestors are numerous enough to be cited and boastfully enumerated by their descendants, the richer is their hasab or sharaf as is evident from a popular expression, al-hasab or sharaf al-dakham.^[6] This means a nobility which becomes "thicker" and stronger through accumulated noble deeds of ancestors generation after generation.^[7] Thus sings the famous Arab poet Nabigha adh-Dhubyani: "His father before him and his father's father built the glories of life as models."^[8]

A tribe with large numbers but few deeds of fame to its credit coming down from its ancestors was not only of less social standing but also subject to mockery from those who could

enumerate more of their ancestors' noble deeds. So we hear from the poet Damra as he says:
"And the joint stock which they have begotten among the race of Sa'd and Malik: but some of
the fire-sticks of the tribe fail to light and are nothing worth."^[9]

In a rigidly tribal system such as that of the Arabs, the fame of ancestors for noble deeds was the foremost source of pride and of claim to superiority. Nobility thus derived, a tribe considered it a constellatory factor in claiming its higher position in relation to other tribes. Within a tribe a particular clan had higher claim to glory, and therefrom to leadership, if its direct line of ancestors was more distinguished by their noble deeds in relation to other clans of the same tribe. This fame of ancestors was not mere genealogical ornament to the descendants but had individual relevance to each man and was of great significance in the claim of individual honour.^[10]

Thus, for example, Nu'man b. al-Mundhir, King of Hira, asked Amir b. Uhaymir b. Bahdala, who had claimed the highest rank among all present, "Are you then the noblest of all Arabs in respect of your tribe?" He replied, "The Ma'add excel in nobility and number, and amongst them the Nizar, and amongst them the Mudar, and amongst them the Khindif, amongst whom the Tamim, and amongst these the 'Awf, within 'Awf the family of Bahdala. He who does not admit this may contest with me."^[11]

Not only physical characteristics were considered by the Arabs to be hereditary;^[12] they firmly believed that noble qualities as well were inherent in certain stocks. Moral qualities thus being genetically transmitted, the best virtues for an individual were therefore only those which were handed down to him from his noble ancestors.

The Arabs made a clear distinction between inherited nobility and nobility claimed only on account of personal merit, the former being a source of great social prestige while the latter was of little consequence. In other words, personal fame and merit counted for little in securing for oneself an exalted position; it was inherited fame and inherited merit which confirmed proper estimation in the society.^[13]

There are numerous references in pre-Islamic poetry where ancestral nobility and virtues are described as a strong and lofty building which they built for their descendants^[14] and which it would be shameful for the latter to destroy.^[15] Ancestral fame of nobility and virtuous deeds must therefore be preserved as the strongest and most continuous incentive to be adopted by the descendants.

It was in this sense that the term Sunna had frequently been used long before Islam.^[16] After Islam the institution of Sunna remained as forceful as ever, but its content was drastically replaced by the Prophetic Sunna. Nevertheless certain trends of the original Sunna did persist,

at least in certain sections of the Arab-Muslim community. The most privileged in Arab society, in the midst of which Islam arose, was therefore the one who could boast publicly that he was destined to have ancestors who had nothing undistinguished to leave to him as their Sunna. A word commonly used to express the idea of ability to trace moral qualities back to one's noble ancestors is 'irq, (p1. a'raq and 'uruq). 'Irq means root, origin of a man, and its plural a'raq signifies ancestors of a man. Thus frequent expressions of a man's inheritance from noble ancestors are found in phrases such as, "he has an hereditary share in generousness or nobleness,"[17] or "noble blood lifted him up to his ancestors." [18]

It is clear that in the religious sentiments of the Arabs, ancestral piety, noble deeds, and moral qualities as Sunna played an important role. The religion of the Arabs, which varied in strength and importance from locality to locality throughout the peninsula, was originally the worship of tribal symbols, which later became identified with certain forces of nature represented by numerous deities.

The tribal deity, symbolized in the sacred stone (nasab), was called the lord (rabb) of its temple. Allah, the supreme deity of the Meccan sanctuary, was described as Rabb al-Ka'ba or Rabb Hadha al-Bayt.[19] It is important to note that the word rabb often referred not to the deity but to the person in charge of the sanctuary.

There was no organized priestly hierarchy, but certain clans acted as guardians of the sanctuaries. This guardianship passed from one generation to another, together with the reputation for hereditary sanctity.[20]

This sanctity, which had its original source in the magical power attributed to the idol which they served, was strictly connected with the idea of nobility of race (sharaf) synonymous with the pride of descent from noble ancestors.

The nobility of the clan being hereditary, the priestly clans of long standing represented the highest aristocracy in pre-Islamic Arabia. Traces of this sort of aristocracy are to be found in the belief of the Arabs, especially of the South, that members of certain families have a charisma or spiritual power, or sharaf.

The guardianship of a sanctuary, a "house" (Bayt), and "honour" (sharaf) came to be understood as being inseparable.[21] As a result, priesthood in Arabia was very often combined with tribal leadership, even with kingship. We may go even further by stating that political leadership there was originally of a religious and priestly nature.

The South Arabian monarchial institution of the mukarrib is a clear proof of the office of the priest-king who embraces at once religious and temporal authority. The clans of political rulers

could have attained the status of great nobility after first acquiring power by political means, but nevertheless, they could not equal the sacerdotal lineages; for example, the kings of Kinda ranked only after the three most noble priestly houses.

These three houses, "after the house of Hashim b. 'Abd Manaf amongst the Quraysh", were Az-Zurara b. 'Udas of the Tamim, Al-Hudhayfa b. Badr of the Fazari tribe, and Dhu'l-Jaddayn b. 'Abd Allah b. Hammam of the Shayban tribe. "And as far as the Kinda were concerned they were not counted amongst the ahl-al-buyutat, even though they were the kings."^[22]

It is apparent that not only was priestly status the foundation of political leadership, but when the latter was attained by men of non-priestly clans, it imposed upon them religious functions. They were also mediators between men and deities. As a result, the idea of tribal leadership and service to the God became synonymous.

Those who led the tribe were of necessity the guardians of the tribal bayt. They were the ahl al-bayt, the "people of the house", or the bayt of such and such a tribe.^[23] Together these leading clans formed the noble estate of Arabia, the buyutat al-'Arab. Even later, when the meaning of the ahl al-bayt became limited to the descendants of the Prophet, the term Buyutat al-'Arab survived into later centuries in the sense of the tribal aristocracy and nobility.^[24]

It is against this background that we have to consider the status of the Banu Hashim, not only among the people of Mecca but in a wider circle due to their vast contacts with the people of different places through the yearly fair of Ukaz and the pilgrimage to the Ka'ba.

Some western scholars have sceptically questioned whether the ancestors of Muhammad were really as important in dignity, nobility, and influence as the sources suggest, and they usually claim that the importance of the Banu Hashim has in fact been grossly exaggerated.

The basis of this doubt is that the 'Abbasids were descendants of Hashim, whereas the rivals whom they ousted, the Umayyads, were the descendants of 'Abd Shams, and that the latter have been treated unsympathetically by the historians who happened to write under the 'Abbasid regime.

For this reason, it is claimed that Hashim and his family, the ancestors of the 'Abbasid caliphs, had been given greater prominence in extant histories than they really possessed.

This entire hypothesis, however, is open to considerable criticism. Scrutiny of the sources suggests that this has not happened to any appreciable extent, and that there are no grounds for assuming any serious falsification or large scale invention in presenting Muhammad's ancestry.^[25]

There is no need to go as far back as Qusayy, father of 'Abd ad-Dar and 'Abd Manaf, whom unanimous historical testimony presents as the unrivalled supreme authority of Mecca both in

religion and in political matters.[26]

After the death of Qusayy, 'Abd ad-Dar inherited his father's authority, but he died early and his sons were too young to effectively maintain their rights. 'Abd Manaf, the younger son of Qusayy, had been the powerful rival of his elder brother and ultimately concentrated some of

the chief offices of his father in his person after the death of 'Abd ad-Dar.[27]

Eventually the sons of 'Abd Manaf inherited their father's influence; among them, Hashim, though the youngest, was entrusted with the most honourable offices pertaining to the Ka'ba,

ar-r:fdha and as-siqaya: providing food and water to the pilgrims.[28]

There are no serious grounds to doubt the accounts given by the early tradition that Hashim achieved great success and glory in his lifetime by his acts of public welfare and by his

splendid hospitality extended to the pilgrims visiting the Ka'ba from all parts of Arabia.[29]

When Hashim died, he was replaced by his brother Al-Muttalib. For a short time it seems that the fortunes of the family were declining under the leadership of Al-Muttalib, but they soon recovered under Hashim's son 'Abd al-Muttalib, who had been brought up in Medina with his

mother and then brought to Mecca by his uncle Al-Muttalib.[30]

The other sons of Hashim having died without male issue, 'Abd al-Muttalib took charge of the family's affairs, which meant the de facto merger of the Banu Hashim and Banu 'Abd al-Muttalib. This is not the place to discuss whether or not the family of Hashim at that time was as prosperous and influential in Meccan internal affairs as it used to be. The same sources which are too often suspected of being biased in presenting Muhammad's ancestors in unduly favourable circumstances do not hesitate to relate how 'Abd al-Muttalib faced serious set-

backs at the beginning of his career.

The grand offices of ar-rifada and as-siqaya secured for the house of Hashim a commanding and permanent influence, and it seems natural that by the virtue of these offices a widespread fame abroad must have guaranteed to the family at least some regard in Mecca. 'Abd al-Muttalib seems to have been a man of initiative and energy,[31] necessary prerequisites to

become a man of consequence in the Meccan merchant aristocracy.

He greatly enhanced his position by restoring the ancient well of Zamzam. In the course of time, he became the chief custodian of the Ka'ba and was also regarded as a renowned judge

of the customary law.

Because of his position as the sole person in charge of the main services pertaining to the most respected sanctuary of the Peninsula, he became one of the most, if not the most, prominent figures of Mecca. We are told by Ibn Sa'd and Ibn Hashim that "he was the leader of the Quraysh until his death," and that "his greatness in honour (sharaf) attained an exalted

position which no one from amongst his fathers had reached before him. He commanded great respect and the love of his people.”[32]

After 'Abd al-Muttalib's death, his eldest surviving son Abu Talib inherited his father's position. It seems, however, that Abu Talib did not prove himself to be of that same calibre and energy as his father and grandfathers, and consequently the family lost much of that power and command which it had previously enjoyed in the inner circle of Meccan aristocratic society.[33]

Nevertheless it does not necessarily follow that the material decline of the family's fortunes should have deprived it, in the minds of the people, of the memory of their immediate past. The regard for a successor of three or four illustrious generations could not have faded so soon, especially among groups beyond Mecca. The sanctuary of the Ka'ba, a shrine of extreme antiquity, was a highly important and popular centre of worship in the Peninsula,[34] and its offices of as-siqaya and imarat al-bayt (keeper of the Ka'ba) are noted in the Qur'an.[35]

Supplying the pilgrims with water must have been a lucrative job in Mecca, where water is so scarce, and the water of Zamzam, which soon shared in the sacredness of the sanctuary, was required not only by the yearly pilgrims but also by the huge trade caravans halting at Mecca.[36]

Many early writers have recorded detailed accounts of the universal influence of the Ka'ba, of the vast contacts of the people of Mecca due to its being a centre for the trade caravans from Yaman in the South, from Dumat al-Jandal in the extreme North, and from other far-off places, and of the Ukaz, the greatest of the Arabs' yearly fairs.

It is therefore natural that the honorific services attached to the sanctuary and rendered by the house of Hashim for such a long period must have extended the family's fame and prestige over a very wide area as the pilgrims and the caravans left Mecca.

We can thus conclude that at the time of Muhammad's emergence, his family must have retained the glory and memory of the long-standing sacerdotal lineage of Hashim even though the family's material and political fortunes were at a low ebb at that time.

Psychologically at least, the works and deeds of three generations cannot be obliterated from the consciousness of the people abroad by the sudden decline in wealth and political power of the present generation at Mecca. The Banu Hashim were commonly recognized by the Arabs as the guardians of the Temple, the Ahl al-Bayt, of Mecca.[37]

It was in this family background that Muhammad arose as the Messenger of God and restorer of the true religious Sunna of Abraham and Ishmael[38] which had been corrupted and distorted by the people through the ages. Abraham was not only recognized by the Arabs as their tribal father and progenitor but was also acknowledged by them as the founder of the

sanctuary of the Ka'ba and of Mecca.

This tradition was no Muslim legend. If it had not been an accepted truth long before Muhammad's time, it could not have been referred to in the Qur'an as an acknowledged fact; nor could certain spots around the pre-Islamic Ka'ba have been connected, as we know them to have been, with the names of Abraham and Ishmael.[39]

Muhammad was fully conscious of this popular and deep-rooted tradition of Abraham's association with the Ka'ba, with which the Arabs in general and Muhammad's four generations of predecessors in particular were so closely linked. Ibn Khaldun points out that it was regarded as something extraordinary and most honourable if the leadership continued in one and the same family for four generations.[40]

All the factors discussed above combine to form an inseparable background against which the problem of succession to Muhammad has to be considered. As has been pointed out above, this problem must not be considered only from the point of view of seventh century Meccan society, for the Umma of Muhammad at the time of his death was composed of people of a variety of background, values, and ideas, drawn from different parts of Arabia.

It was, therefore, natural that different people should view the problem from different angles. The way in which the problem of succession was solved in the assembly of Saqifa between the death and the burial of the Prophet will be discussed below. It will suffice here to note in passing that the decision taken in Saqifa was also in conformity with the common practice and ancient tradition of the Arabs, at least of one important group from among them.

The two main constituent groups of the Umma at the time of Muhammad's death were the Arabs of northern and central Arabia, of whom the tribe of the Quraysh was the most important and dominant, and the people of South Arabian origin, the Banu Qayla, whose two major branches, the Aws and the Khazraj, were settled in Yathrib.

They were known as the ansar, or "helpers", because they gave Muhammad and Islam a shelter and a home at the most critical moment of the Prophet's mission. Differences in almost all aspects of life-social, cultural, economic, religious, geographical, and even presumably racial and ancestral- between the Arabs of the South and the North are too well known to need elaboration here at length. Goldziher,[41] Wellhausen,[42] Nicholson,[43] and many other outstanding scholars have thoroughly studied the subject in depth.

It should, however, be pointed out that to consider all the Arabs as one single cultural group is a grave mistake. They had never been so. The North was cut off from the centre by the desert as the South was separated from the rest of Arabia by the Rub 'al-Khali.

Widely different geographical and economic conditions played their inevitable and natural

role in every aspect of development of the two kindred races. The Arabs of northern and central Arabia, the Hijaz, and the highlands of Najd, developed along different lines from the southern Arabs of Al-Yaman in character, way of life, and socio-political and socio-religious institutions. As in all other aspects of life, the two groups differed widely from each other in religious sensitivity and feelings.

Among the people of the much more advanced and civilized provinces of South Arabia there was a clear predominance of religious ideas, whereas among the people of the North religious sentiments were evidently lacking. A South Arabian prince, for example, in his votive inscriptions thanked the gods who made him victorious over his enemies, and warriors erected votive memorials to their divine helper for any success they achieved.

In general the thankful and submissive feeling towards the gods is the basic theme of the existent South Arabian monuments. In sharp contrast to this, the warriors of northern Arabia boasted of their heroic courage and the bravery of their companions. They did not feel obliged to thank divine powers for their success, though they did not altogether refuse to acknowledge such powers.^[44]

Even the scanty traces of lukewarm religious sentiments amongst the northern Arabs cannot be dissociated from the influence of the southern Arabs settled down in the North.^[45] This difference in religious sentiments was naturally reflected in their pattern of tribal leadership. The chiefs or the sheikhs in the North had always been elected on a principle of seniority in age and ability in leadership. There might sometimes be other considerations, such as nobility and lineal prestige, but in the North these were of less importance.

The Arabs in the South were, on the other hand, accustomed to hereditary succession in leadership based on hereditary sanctity. Because of this fact the South Arabian tribes of the Aws and the Khazraj at Yathrib presented an atmosphere more easily conducive to the religious thought which was of great importance in Muhammad's success. Thus we may assume that the majority of the North Arabians understood Islam, at least at the first stage of their acceptance of it, as a socio-political discipline based on the religion taught by the Prophet, since they had been lukewarm to religious impulses.

The Aws and the Khazraj, South Arabian in origin, understood Islam as basically a religious discipline coupled with a socio-political movement, since in their cultural past, though remote, they had been more sensitive to religion. It was only a matter of emphasis in approach and understanding, at least at the first spontaneous response.

When the Prophet died the question of his succession was therefore understood to combine in it both political and religious leadership, a principle well known to the Arabs though naturally

with different degrees of emphasis on one or the other of these two aspects. To some it was more political than religious; to others it was more religious than political. The majority of the Muslims, who readily accepted Abu Bakr, laid more emphasis on the sociopolitical side in accepting the customary procedure of succession to the chieftainship in its new interpretation given by the first caliph, as we shall examine below. They largely, if not solely, disregarded the religious principle and the idea of the hereditary sanctity of a certain house. This assumption is strongly supported by the statement of 'Umar b. al-Khattab to Ibn 'Abbas, "The people do not like having the prophethood. and caliphate combined in the Banu Hashim."^[46]

We must assume that both 'Umar and Abu Bakr were well aware of the importance which the idea of inherited sanctity held in one section of the Umma. At the same time they must have realized that should the election of Abu Bakr be open to doubt, the unity of the Umma would be seriously endangered. They nevertheless considered it necessary to dissociate the caliphate from the priesthood of the Ka'ba, which was enshrined in the hereditary sanctity of the Banu Hashim.

There were others, especially of South Arabian origin; who felt that in Mecca leadership, together with priestly prerogatives, was inherited in the clan of 'Abd Manaf by the Hashimites,^[47] though after the death of 'Abd al-Muttalib they were overshadowed by the clan of Umayya in political matters. The rise of Muhammad as the Prophet of God and the supreme authority in Arabia again brought the Banu Hashim to power, a fact acknowledged by Abu Sufyan's surrender to the Prophet at the fall of Mecca.

To some of the Companions, therefore, a normal logical choice of successor would have been another Hashimite, and the entire question of succession to the leadership of the Muslim community was, for them, a problem of great religious significance. In addition to political expediency, deep-rooted religious considerations had to be taken into account by certain of the Companions.

These, whom we may call more legalistically minded individuals, could not agree to the interpretation given by Abu Bakr and his supporters, because, as we shall see below, they understood the leadership of the community as above all a religious office. To them Muhammad was the restorer of the true religion of Abraham and Ishmael, and so in him the hereditary sanctity of his clan reached its highest level. This idea was also strongly supported by the Qur'an when it declared, for example: "Verily, God has chosen Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham and the family of 'Imran above all people."^[48]

The commentators have all unanimously explained that Muhammad belonged to the "family of

Abraham" referred to in this verse. Thus when he died his successor could only be a man from the same family and endowed with the same qualities by the same principles. In this respect, there must be noted the Qur'anic concept of the exalted and virtuous family, whose favour in the eyes of God derives from their righteous deeds and services in the cause of God. In all ages the prophets have been particularly concerned with ensuring that the special favour of God bestowed upon them for the guidance of man be maintained in their families and pass to their progeny. The Qur'an repeatedly speaks of the prophets praying to God for their progeny and asking Him to continue His guidance in their lineages. In the answer to these prayers, the verses of the Qur'an bear direct testimony to the special favour of God being granted to the direct descendants of the prophets to keep their fathers' covenants intact, to become true examples of their fathers' righteousness, and to keep fast to the path of righteousness set by these prophets. Four terms are repeatedly used in the Qur'an to express God's special favour for the descendants of the prophets: Dhurriya, Al Ahl, and Qurba.

The word Dhurriya, meaning offspring, progeny, or direct descendant, has been used in thirty-two verses of the Qur'an. It is used either in direct connection with the prophets' own concern that their children should remain on their path or that their work of guidance should be continued through their own progeny. Often the word is used in verses where the prophets claim that God had selected them to become models of righteousness based on their direct descent from other prophets. This concern for a prophet's progeny is reflected in a verse (II, 124) where Abraham was told by God: "I will make you an Imam of the people." Whereupon Abraham pleads, "And what about my offspring (Dhurriyati)?" God replies, "My covenant will not go to evildoers."

In a similar verse (XIV, 37) Abraham prays to God: "Oh my Lord God! I have made some of my offspring to dwell in a valley without cultivation by the Sacred House, in order, Oh Lord, that they may establish regular prayer: so fill the hearts of some among men with love towards them and feed them with fruits: so that they may give thanks."

This prayer is favourably answered when God declares (XIX, 58): "There are they on whom God bestowed His bounties from the prophets of the posterity of Adam; and of those whom we carried with Noah[in the Ark] and of the posterity (Dhurriya) of Abraham and Israel and of those whom we guided and chose."

The term Al, meaning nearer or nearest relations by descent from the same father or ancestor or a man's family or kinsmen, is used in the Qur'an twenty-six times in connection with the descendants of the prophets or those who succeeded them in guidance and special favour

from God. A verse describing Muhammad as belonging to the descendants of Abraham has been quoted above. In another verse (IV, 54) we read: "Or do they envy the people for what God has given them of His grace: But indeed we have given to Abraham's children (Al Ibrahim) the book and the wisdom and we gave them a great kingdom."

The word Ahl, which is used many times in the Qur'an, has almost the same meaning as Al, though it is also used in a broader sense in referring to the people of a town or inhabitation, a group, or followers. When used in conjunction with the term bayt: Ahl al-bayt, it refers to the immediate descendants of a family or such a family of the same "house", or bayt. In this compound form, Ahl al-bayt is used in the Qur'an especially in reference to the immediate family of Muhammad. In verse XXXIII, 33, we hear: "And God only wishes to remove from you[all kinds of] uncleanness, O members of the family[of Muhammad] and thoroughly purify you."

All the commentators of the Qur'an are unanimous in the opinion that the term Ahl al-bayt in this verse refers to Muhammad's daughter Fatima, his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali, and his two beloved grandsons, Hasan and Husayn.

The fourth term, Qurba (from the root qaruba, nearness), means near or blood relationship, relatives, or kinsmen. As is the case the term Qurba was also used specifically for the immediate relatives of Muhammad. Thus the Qur'an (XLII, 23) reads: 'That is the bounty whereof God gives glad tidings to his servants who believe and do righteous deeds. "Say,[O Muhammad] I do not ask any reward from you for this[apostleship] except the love of[my] relatives."

Commenting on this verse, the commentators are again unanimous in their opinion that the word Qurba refers to Muhammad's relatives - Fatima, 'Ali, Hasan, and Husayn.

The only point of disagreement arises in that the Sunni commentators include the wives of the Prophet, whereas the Shi'i writers do not.

The total number of verses that mention special favour requested for and granted to the families of the various prophets by God runs to over a hundred in the Qur'an. From this we may draw two conclusions. If one accepts the axiom that the Qur'an was revealed in terms understandable in the cultural atmosphere of seventh-century Arabia, then it is obvious that the idea of the sanctity of a prophet's family was a commonly accepted principle at that time. Even more important is the fact that the Qur'an's constant repetition of this idea must have left the impression among some of the Muslims that Muhammad's family had a religious prerogative over others.

Neither Banu Taym b. Murra, the clan of Abu Bakr, nor Banu 'Adi b. Ka'b, the people of Umar,

had ever been regarded with esteem on any religious grounds, thus those who laid stress on the religious principle could not accept them as candidates for succession to Muhammad. The candidate could come only from the Banu Hashim, and amongst them the figure of 'Ali was by far the most prominent. He too was the great-grandson of Hashim and the grandson of 'Abd al-Muttalib.

He was the son of Abu Talib, Muhammad's uncle, who had given the Prophet the care and love of the father Muhammad had lost before birth. 'Ali was the nearest and closest associate of Muhammad, for the Prophet had acted as his guardian during the famine of Mecca, and he had subsequently adopted him as a brother both before the Hijra and again in Medina.^[49]

He was the first male to embrace Islam,^[50] Khadija being the first woman. He was also the husband of Fatima, the Prophet's only surviving daughter, and by her fathered two of the Prophet's grandsons, Al-Hasan and Al-Husayn, both of whom Muhammad loved dearly.

It seems that these inherent personal qualities and virtues secured 'Ali a unique and advantageous place over all other family members and companions of Muhammad, and earned him a group of friends who were devoted to him with a special zeal and consideration even during the lifetime of the Prophet.

Perhaps it is because of this that the Shi'a claim the existence of Shi'ism even in the lifetime of the Prophet; the earliest heresiographers, Sa'd al-Ash'ari and An-Nawbakhti, clearly state that Shi'ism (in the sense of a particular regard and appreciation of 'Ali's personal merits) had already appeared in Muhammad's lifetime.^[51]

Moreover, this idea of 'Ali's superior qualifications for the caliphate was further strengthened by a series of events which took place during the Prophet's life in which he showed some special consideration for 'Ali. A few of these should be pointed out as illustrations of 'Ali's growth in prestige and favour:

1) At the very beginning of his mission, when the verse "Warn your tribe, the nearest kinsmen" (XXVI, 214) was revealed (about three years after Muhammad's first revelation and the conversion of Khadija, 'Ali, and Abu Bakr), the Prophet gathered all the Banu 'Abd al-Muttalib and informed them of his mission.

Explaining his task, he asked for support and help in furthering the cause. Instead of assistance, the Prophet received only ridicule; the only exception was 'Ali, who, though only thirteen years old, gave the Prophet his enthusiastic support.^[52]

2) The prerogative of the religious brotherhood between 'Ali and Muhammad, which has already been mentioned above, must be taken into special account in this series of events. The Prophet adopted 'Ali as his brother in faith (ukhuwwa) both before the Hijra and again in

Medina. This was such a recognized historical fact that no historian has denied it.

3) 'Ali's position can only have been elevated in the eyes of the Companions when he was appointed by Muhammad as the standard bearer at both Badr and Khaybar and in other wars.[53]

4) The nomination of 'Ali by the Prophet as his deputy at Medina during the expedition to Tabuk was another important record to 'Ali's credit.[54] It was on this occasion that the famous tradition is reported in which Muhammad said to 'Ali, "You are to me what Aaron was to Moses except that there will be no Prophet after me." [55]

This tradition attached to the event of Tabuk has been recorded by almost all historians and traditionists, and when we see that Muhammad was referring to many similarities in his person and mission with other great prophets of the past, we find no difficulty in accepting this tradition.

In one of the several Qur'anic passages dealing with this subject (XX, 2032), Moses asks of God: "And give me a minister from my family, Aaron, my brother; add to my strength through him, and make him share my task."

Muhammad's comparison of himself with Moses would thus have been incomplete without an Aaron, and obviously no other person in his family but 'Ali could serve him as Aaron.

5) Yet another very important event was the communication of the chapter of al-Bara'a (Qur'an, IX). In the ninth year of the Hijra, the Prophet sent Abu Bakr to lead the people in the Hajj. After Abu Bakr's departure to Mecca the chapter of Bara'a was revealed to the Prophet to communicate to the people, especially to the polytheists.

When people asked the Prophet whether he would dispatch the chapter to Abu Bakr to deliver it on his behalf, he replied, "No, I will not send it except through someone from amongst the people of my family (rajul-un min ahli bayti)." The Prophet then called 'Ali and ordered him to take his own camel and go to Mecca at once and deliver the Qur'anic message to the people on his behalf.[56]

There are no serious grounds to doubt the authenticity of these events, which have been recorded by writers of all schools of thought and which also seem plausible in their context. Even if one is inclined to extreme caution and scepticism, it cannot be denied that these events in favour of 'Ali were in such wide circulation that the majority of historians and traditionists from the earliest times had to record them.

In this series of events, the famous but controversial tradition of Ghadir Khum, upon which the Shi'a place the utmost importance, has been intentionally ignored. This event is named after a place called Ghadir Khum, a pool or a marsh with some shady trees, situated only a few miles

from Mecca on the road to Medina, from where people disperse to their different destinations. When Muhammad was returning from his Farewell Pilgrimage he stopped at Ghadir Khum on 18 Dhu'l-Hijja (10 March 632) to make an announcement to the pilgrims who accompanied him from Mecca and who were to disperse from this junction. By the orders of the Prophet, a special dais or pulpit made of branches of the trees was erected for him. After the noon prayer the Prophet sat on the pulpit and made his last public address to the largest gathering before his death three months later.

Taking 'Ali by the hand, Muhammad asked his followers whether he was not superior in authority and person (awla) to the believers themselves. The crowd cried out in one voice: "It is so, O Apostle of God." He then declared: "He of whom I am the mawla[the patron, master, leader, friend?], of him 'Ali is also the mawla (man kuntu mawlahu fa 'Ali-un mawlahu). O God, be the friend of him who is his friend, and be the enemy of him who is his enemy (Allahumma wali man walahu wa 'adi man adahu)."

As far as the authenticity of the event itself is concerned, it has hardly ever been denied or questioned even by the most conservative Sunni authorities, who have themselves recorded it. Most noteworthy among them are Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal in his Musnad, Tirmidhi, Nasa'i, Ibn Maja, Abu Da'ud and almost all other Sunan writers, Ibn al-Athir in his Usd al-Ghaba Ibn 'Abd al-Barr in his Isti'ab, followed by all other writers of biographical works and even Ibn 'Abd Rabbih in his 'Iqd al-Farid, and Jahiz. in his 'Uthmaniyya.[57]

The traditions of Ghadir are so abundantly reported and so commonly attested by hundreds of different transmitters belonging to all schools of thought that it would be futile to doubt their authenticity. Ibn Kathir,[58] a most staunch supporter of the Sunni viewpoint, has devoted seven pages to this subject and has collected a great number of different isnads from which the tradition is narrated.

It is also Ibn Kathir who informs us that the famous historian at-Tabari, in a two-volume unfinished work entitled Kitab al-Fada'il (mentioned also by Yaqut in his Irshad, VI, p.452), wrote in full details the Prophet's discourse in favour of 'Ali at Ghadir Khum. A modern scholar, Husayn 'Ali Mahfuz, in his penetrating researches on the subject of Ghadir Khum, has recorded with documentation that this tradition has been narrated by at least 110 Companions, 84 tabi'un, 355 'ulama', 25 historians, 27 traditionists, 11 exegesists, 18 theologians, and 5 philologists.[59] Most of them were later counted by the Sunnis as among their own number. Horovitz[60] and Goldziher[61], in their studies on the tradition of Ghadir Khum, state that the oldest evidence of this tradition is the verses of Kumayt (died 126/743-4), which they consider undoubtedly genuine. The refusal of these two scholars to accept any evidence before Kumayt

is based on their sceptical assumption that the verses of the Prophet's poet, Hassan b. Thabit, composed on the spot, might not be genuine. However, the Shi'i sources, and also some of the Sunni authorities, claim that the oldest evidence is the verse of Hassan b. Thabit, which the poet, with the Prophet's approbation, instantly composed and recited^[62] when the people were congratulating 'Ali on the occasion.

Keeping in view the fact that Hassan was accompanying the Prophet at his historical first pilgrimage after the migration, and the fact that the poet used to compose and recite verses on all noteworthy occasions of the Prophet's activities, it is highly improbable that this event should have passed unrecorded by Hassan, the official poet-reporter of Muhammad. The event is, however, not recorded by some of those Sources. which are commonly used for the study of the life of the Prophet, such as Ibn Hashim, Tabari, and Ibn Sa'd. They either pass in silence over Muhammad's stop at Ghadir Khum, or, if they mention it, say nothing of this tradition.

Veccia Vaglieri explains the attitude of these few writers in that they "evidently feared to attract the hostility of the Sunnis, who were in power, by providing material for the polemic of the Shi'is, who used these words to support their thesis of 'Ali's right to the caliphate. Consequently, the western biographers of Muhammad, whose work is based on these sources, equally make no reference to what happened at Ghadir Khum. It is, however, certain that Muhammad did speak in this place and utter the famous sentence, for the account of this event has been preserved, either in concise form or in detail, not only by Ya'qubi, whose sympathy for the 'Alid cause is well known, but also in the collections of traditions which are considered as canonical, especially in the Musnad of Ibn Hanbal; and the hadiths are so numerous and so well attested by the different isnads that it does not seem possible to reject them."^[63]

The bone of contention between the Sunnis and the Shi'is is not, however, and never has been, the authenticity of the event of Ghadir Khum, nor the declaration of the Prophet in favour of 'Ali, as quoted above; the real disagreement is in the meaning of the word mawla used by the Prophet. The Shi'a unequivocally take the word in the meaning of leader, master, and patron, and therefore the explicitly nominated successor of the Prophet. The Sunnis, on the other hand, interpret the word mawla in the meaning of a friend, or the nearest kin and confidant.^[64] No doubt the richness of meaning of many an Arabic word and the resulting ambiguity does render both the interpretations equally valid. The Sunnis, while accepting the tradition, assert that in that sentence the Prophet simply meant to exhort his followers to hold his cousin and the husband of his only surviving daughter in high esteem and affection.

Further, the Sunnis explain the circumstance which necessitated the Prophet's exhortation in that some people were murmuring against 'Ali due to his harsh and indifferent treatment in the distribution of the spoils of the expedition of Al-Yaman, which had just taken place under 'Ali's leadership, and from where he, along with those who participated in the expedition, directly came to Mecca to join the Prophet at the Hajj.

To dispel these ill-feelings against his son-in-law, the Prophet spoke in this manner.^[65] Accepting this explanation as such, the fact still remains that this declaration of the Prophet in such an extraordinary manner, equating 'Ali in authority and person with himself, does provide a strong basis for the Shi'i claims.

Taking for granted the controversial character in interpretation of the Ghadir tradition, the events mentioned above could have been understood by some of the Prophet's Companions as indicative of his inclination towards 'Ali, though he did not or could not nominate him explicitly, perhaps because of the old North Arabian custom of leaving the selection of a leader to the people. A commonly suggested obstacle in the way of 'Ali is said to have been his comparatively young age at the time of Muhammad's death.

However, our sources do not fail to point out that, though the "Senate" (Nadwa) of pre-Islamic Mecca was generally a council of elders only, the sons of the chieftain Qusayy were privileged to be exempted from this age restriction and were admitted to the council despite their youth. In later times more liberal concessions seem to have been in vogue; Abu Jahl was admitted despite his youth, and Hakim b. Hazm was admitted when he was only fifteen or twenty years old.^[66] Ibn 'Abd Rabbih tells us, "There was no monarchic king over the Arabs of Mecca in the Jahiliya. So whenever there was a war, they took a ballot among chieftains and elected one as 'King', were he a minor or a grown man.

Thus on the day of Fijar, it was the turn of the Banu Hashim, and as a result of the ballot Al-'Abbas, who was then a mere child, was elected, and they seated him on the shield."^[67] At the time of Muhammad's death 'Ali was at least thirty-three years old, though in some other sources his age is given as thirty-six.

In conclusion, the idea that the question of the succession was primarily religious, rather than merely political, the popular notion of the hereditary sanctity of the Banu Hashim, coupled with the events which took place during the lifetime of the Prophet in favour of 'Ali; led to the crystallization of a point of view concerning the succession to the leadership of the community in which a number of Muhammad's Companions felt that 'Ali was the most suitable person to keep the covenant intact. In the heated debates of the Saqifa incident, right after the Prophet's death, these Companions did not hesitate to voice their opinions. The resulting disagreement,

to which we now turn, marks the beginning of what was eventually to develop into a permanent
.division of the Umma into Sunni and Shi'i

Notes:

- [1] W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh, 1968), p.26
- [2] See Lane, *Lexicon*, IV, pp.1632 f.
- [3] e.g. XIX, 69; XXVIII, 15; XXXVII, 83
- [4] Ibn Qutayba, *Rasa'il al-Bulagha'*, p. 360
- [5] Aghani, I, p.45
- [6] Aghani, I, p.72; Yaqut, *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, III, p.519
- [7] Aghani, X, p.300
- [8] *Diwan an-Nabhiga adh-Dhubyani*, ed. Shukri Faysal (Beirut, 1968), p.165
- [9] *Mufaddaliyat*, XCIII, V.14
- [10] *Mufaddaliyat*, XXXI, v.4: "By God, my cousin, thou art not better in stock than I, (La afdalta fi hasabi)"
- [11] Ibn Qutayba, *op. cit.*, p.348; 'Iqd, III, p.332
- [12] Aghani, I, p.31
- [13] 'Amr b. Kulthum, *Mu'allafa*, vv. 40, 52, 55; *Mufaddaliyat*, XL, v.44; LXXXVII, v.2; Zuhayr b. Abi Salma, *Mu'allafa*, v, p.26; Aghani, X, p.300
- [14] Labid, *Mu'allafa*, v.83; 'Amr b. Kulthum, *Mu'allafa*, v.52
- [15] Aghani, XXII, p. iii
- [16] Labid, *op. cit.*, v. 81
- [17] Lane, *Lexicon*, V, pp.2020 ff
- [18] Yaqut, *op. cit.*, III, p.471
- [19] Qur'an, CVI, 3
- [20] Ibn Hisham, I, p.126; 'Iqd, III, p.333
- [21] On this see R. B. Serjeant's "Haram and Hawtah, The Sacred Enclave in Arabia", in *Melanges Taha Husain*, ed. 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi (Cairo, 1962), pp.42 f.; and "The Saiyids of Hadramawt", *BSOAS*, XXI (London, 1957); also Ibn Durayd, *Ishtiqaq*, p.173
- [22] Ibn Durayd, *op. cit.*, p.238; Aghani; XIX, p.128; 'Iqd, III, pp.331 if.
- [23] Ibn Hisham, I, pp. 143, 145; 'Iqd, III, pp. 313, 333 if; Ibn Durayd, *loc. cit.*; Serjeant, "Haram and Hawtah", p.43.
- [24] Serjeant, *loc. cit.*
- [25] See W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford, 1953), p.31; Serjeant, "The

- [26] Ibn Hisham, I, pp.131 ff.; Azraqi, Akhbar Makkah, I, pp.64 ff.; Ibn Sa'd, I, pp. 6q ff.; 'Iqd, III, pp. 312 f.
- [27] Ibn Sa'd, I, p. 74. Azraqi, Akhbar, I, p.66, states that 'Abd Manaf possessed not Only ar-rifada and al-siqaya, but also Al-qiyada, leadership of Mecca.
- [28] Ibn Hisham, I, pp. 143 f.; Ibn Sa'd, I, p.78. Azraqi, Akhbar, I, p.67, says that after 'Abd Manaf, the offices of ar-rifada and as-siqaya passed to Hashim, and that of al-qiyada was given to 'Abd Shams.
- [29] Ibn Hisham, loc. cit.; Ibn Sa'd, loc. cit
- [30] Ibn Hisham, I, pp.145 f.; Ibn Sa'd, I, pp. 8l if.
- [31] Cf. Montgomery Watt, Muhammad at Mecca, p.31
- [32] Ibn Sa'd, I, p. 85; Ibn Hisham, I, p.150
- [33] Cf. EI2 article "Abu Talib"
- [34] A recurrent theme in the Qur'an, best illustrated in II, 126-7
- [35] IX, 19
- [36] See Muhammad Hamidullah, "The City State of Mecca", IC, XII (1938), p. 266
- [37] Ibn Hisham, I, p.145; Tabari, I, pp.2786 f.
- [38] Qur'an, II, 135-7
- [39] ibid., II, 125
- [40] Ibn Khaldun, Proleg., I, p.289. Cf. Von Kremer, Staatsidee des Islam; trans. Khuda Bukhsh, Politics in Islam (Lahore, 1920), p. 10
- [41] Muhammedanische Studien, trans. S. M. Stern and C. R. Barber, Muslim Studies (London, 1967), I, pp.79-100
- [42] The Arab Kingdom and Its Fall, trans. M. Weir (Calcutta, 1927), passim
- [43] A Literary History of the Arabs (Cambridge, 1969), pp. I ff
- [44] Goldziher, Muslim Studies, I, pp.12-13
- [45] ibid., p.14
- [46] Tabari, I, p.2769 f.
- [47] Most of the supporters of 'Ali in the early disagreement over the caliphate were of South Arabian origin and were quite clear in their Defence of 'Ali's claims on religious grounds.
- [48] III, 33
- [49] Ibn Hisham, I, pp.262 f.; II, pp.150 f.; Baladhuri, I, p.270; Ibn Habib, Muhabbar, p.70
- [50] According to Ibn Ishaq, 'Ali was ten years old at the time when Muhammad received his first revelation and was the first who prayed with the Prophet and Khadija (Ibn Hisham, I, p.262;

Baladhuri, I, p. 112). Those comparatively few early writers who mention Abu Bakr as the first Muslim among men do so because of 'Ali's young age. See Isti'ab, III, Pp.1090 ff., which gives numerous traditions with different isnads supporting the view that 'Ali was the first male to accept Islam and to pray with Muhammad, whereas Abu Bakr was the first to publicly announce his Islam.

[51] Sa'd al-Ash'ari, Firaq, p. 15; Nawbakhti, Firaq, p.23

[52] Mas'udi, Muruj, II, p.277. Also See commentaries of Tabari Ibn Kathir, and Tha'labi under verse 214, Sura XXVI

[53] Ibn Hisham, II, p.264; III, p.349; Isti 'ab, III, p.1097; 'Iqd, IV, p.312

[54] Ibn Hisham, IV, p.163

[55] Ibn Hisham, loc. cit.; Bukhari, Sahih, II, p.194; Nawbakhti, Firaq, p.19; 'Iqd, IV, p.311; Isti 'ab, III, pp.1099 f.

[56] Ibn Hisham, IV, p.190 (repeated by the majority of historians and traditionists)

[57] See Veccia Vaglieri, EI2 Art. "Ghadir Khum", where there are mentioned exact references to all of the above works except 'Iqd, IV, p.311

[58] Al-Bidaya wa 'I-Nihaya (Cairo, 1348-51 AH), V, pp. 208-14

[59] Ta'rikh ash-Shi'a (Karbala, n.d.), p.77. In modern times numerous voluminous works on Ghadir Khum have appeared, thus Amini's Al-Ghadir in 38 volumes, and Al-Musawi's 'Abaqat al-Anwar, in 34 volumes; all dealing with the rijal of the tradition.

[60] EI1 article "Kumayt"

[61] Cf. EI2 article "Ghadir Khum", Bibliography

[62] Amini, Ghadir, II, p.32; also see 'Amili, A'yan ash-Shi'a, III/i, pp. 524-32

[63] EI2 article "Ghadir Khum"

[64] Ibn Kathir, loc. cit.

[65] ibid.

[66] Azraqi, Akhbar Makkah, I, p.65; Ibn Durayd, Ishtiqaq, p.97

[67] 'Iqd, III, p.315