The First Holy Imam

Name: ‘Alî.

Agnomen: Abu ’l-Hasan; Abu Turâb.

Title: Amiru ’l-Mu’minin; al-Murtaza; Haydar.

Father: Abu Tâlib bin ‘Abdu ’l-Muttalib.

Mother: Fâtimah bint Asad.

mu ’l-Fil, i.e,, 23 years before hijrah.ĩ‘ Birth: 13 Rajab 30th year of

.Death: 21 Ramadhan 40 years after hijrah in Kufah , Iraq

Birth to Bi‘that .1

Amîru ’l-Mu’minîn ‘Alî —upon whom be peace— was born in the holy Ka’bah. ‘Abbâs bin ‘Abdu ‘l-Muttalib and others were sitting by the Ka’bah when they saw Fâtima bint Asad come to the Ka’bah and prayed to God to make her pregnancy easy for her. No sooner had she finished the prayer when the wall of the Ka‘bah split by a solemn miracle and Fâtima entered inside the Ka‘bah and the split area of the wall returned to its normal position. ‘Abbâs and others flocked to the door of the Ka‘bah and tried to open it but in vain. They realized that this was an act of miraculous nature and so they left the door alone.

After three days, Fâtima bint Asad emerged from the Ka‘bah carrying the infant ‘Alî in her arms. This was ten years before the commencement of the prophetic mission (bi’that).

For the first six years, ‘Alî was raised by his father Abu Tâlib who also was guardian of the Prophet of Islam. When he was six years old, a famine occurred in and around Mecca . The Prophet and his other uncles decided to help Abu Tâlib by sharing the burden of raising the latter’s sons. ‘Alî was requested by the Prophet to leave his father’s house and come to the house of his cousin. There he was placed directly under the guardianship and custody of the Holy Prophet.

‘Alî describes the time of childhood he spent with the Prophet in the following words: “Certainly, you know my position of close kinship and special relationship with the Prophet of Allah—peace and blessings of Allah be upon him and his descendants. When I was only a child he took charge of me. He used to press me to his chest and lay me beside him in his bed, bring his body close to mine and make me smell his smell. He used to chew [the food] and then feed me with it. He found no lie in my speaking, nor weakness in any act. From the time of his weaning, Allah had put a mighty angel with him to take him along the path of high character

and good behaviour through day and night, while I used to follow him like a young camel following in the footprints of its mother."

2. Bi'that to Hijrat

A few years later, when the Prophet was endowed with the Divine gift of prophecy and for the first time received the Divine revelation in the cave of Hira ', after Khadijah, 'Alî was the first to declare his faith in the Prophet's mission. In the same sermon quoted above, 'Alî said, "Every year he used to go in seclusion to the hill of Hirâ', where I saw him but no one else saw him. In those days Islam did not exist in any house except that of the Prophet of Allah and Khadijah, while I was the third after these two. I used to see and watch the effulgence of divine revelation and message, and breathed the scent of prophethood."

For the first three years of the mission, Prophet Muhammad had not been ordered to invite people to his message openly. When finally the order came, first the Prophet was asked to invite his relatives. In that gathering, the Prophet said that the first person to support his call would be his brother (akhi), inheritor (wasiyi) and vicegerent (khalifati). The only person to rise from his place and accept the call was 'Alî and the Prophet accepted his declaration of support and faith. Therefore 'Alî was the first man in Islam to accept the faith and is the first among the followers of the Prophet to have never worshipped other than the One God.

'Alî was always in the company of the Prophet until the Prophet migrated from Mecca to Medina . On the night of the migration to Medina (hijrah) when infidels had surrounded the house of the Prophet and were determined to invade the house at the end of the night and cut him to pieces while he was in bed, 'Alî slept in place of the Prophet while the Prophet left the house and set out for Medina. This sacrifice on the part of 'Alî was so much appreciated by Allah that He revealed the following verse in his praise: "And there is one among the people who sells (i.e., sacrifice) his life to seek the pleasure of Allah; and Allah is kind to people." (2:207) When the infidels entered the house and found 'Alî in the Prophet's place, they asked "Where has Muhammad gone?" 'Alî replied, "Who said that I was in charge to look after Muhammad?!" The Prophet had safely left the house and was on his way to Medina .

After the departure of the Prophet, according to the Prophet's wish, 'Alî gave back to the people the trusts and charges that they had left with the Prophet. Then he went to Medina with his mother, the daughter of the Prophet, and two other women.

3. Hijrat to the Prophet's Death

In Medina also 'Alî was constantly in the company of the prophet in private and in public. The Prophet gave Fâtima, his beloved daughter from Khadijah, to 'Alî as his wife in the 2nd year of

the Hijrah.

When the Prophet was creating bonds of brotherhood among the Muslims of Medina and the Muslims who had migrated to Medina , he selected ‘Alî as his own brother. He said, “O ‘Alî, you are my brother in this world as well as the hereafter.”

‘Alî was present in all the wars in which the Prophet participated, except the battle of Tabuk when he was ordered to stay in Medina in place of the Prophet. He did not retreat in any battle nor did he turn his face away from any enemy. He never disobeyed the Prophet, so that the Prophet said, “‘Alî is never separated from the Truth nor the Truth from ‘Alî.”

The courage of ‘Alî was proverbial. In all the wars in which he participated during the lifetime of the Prophet, and also afterward, he never displayed fear or anxiety. Although in many battles such as those of Uhud, Hunayn, Khaybar and Khandaq the aides to the Prophet and the Muslim army trembled in fear or dispersed and fled, he never turned his back to the enemy. Never did a warrior or soldier engage ‘Alî in battle and come out of it alive. Yet, with full chivalry he would never slay a weak enemy nor pursue those who fled. He would not engage in surprise attacks or in turning streams of water upon the enemy.

In the Battle of Khandaq, the Muslims had dug a ditch around their encampment. A very brave and famous Arab warrior, ‘Amr bin ‘Ubayd, jumped over the ditch with his horse and challenged the Muslims for combat with him. His courage and bravery was so well-known that no one among the Muslims dared to answer his challenge. The only person who readily agreed to face ‘Amr was ‘Alî bin Abi Tâlib. When ‘Alî was going to face ‘Amr, the Prophet said, “Today the total faith (imân) is going to face the total disbelief (kufr).” ‘Alî defeated ‘Amr, and all other brave warrior’s of the enemy retreated.

In the Battle of Khaybar, the Muslim army attacked the fortresses of the Jews for many days but was not successful. Finally the Prophet declared that, “Tomorrow I will give the flag (i.e., the command) to one who will be steadfast in his position and not retreat until Allâh blesses him with victory. Allâh and the Messenger are his friends and he is their friend.” ‘Alî, who had been in Medina because of eye ailment, joined the army on the next day and the Prophet gave the command to him. ‘Alî marched to the fort of Khaybar and first defeated the bravest of all Jewish soldiers, Marhab, and then conquered the fort. It has been definitively established historically that while moving to conquer the fort, ‘Alî reached the ring of the door and with sudden motion tore off the door and cast it away.

Also on the day when Mecca was conquered the Prophet ordered the idols to be broken. The idol “Hubal” was the largest idol in Mecca , a giant stone statue placed on the top of the Ka’bah. Following the command of the prophet, ‘Alî placed his feet on the Prophet’s shoulders,

climbed to the top of the Ka'bah, pulled "Hubal" from its place and cast it down.

While returning from the last pilgrimage, the Prophet openly and clearly introduced Imam 'Alî at Ghadir Khumm to thousands of Muslims who had accompanied him to hajj and declared that: "Whosoever's master am I, this 'Alî is also his master." He repeatedly said, "I am leaving two things behind and as long as you hold fast to them, you will never go astray: the Book of Allâh (the Qur'ân) and my Ahlu 'l-bayt (the Family)."

A few months after returning from hajj, the Prophet —peace and blessing of Allâh be upon him— passed away from this world on 28th Safar, 11 A.H.

4. The Three Caliphs

On the day of the death of the Prophet, 'Alî was thirty-three years old. Although he was foremost in religious virtues and the most outstanding among the companions of the Prophet, he was pushed aside from the caliphate on the claim that he was too young and that he had many enemies among the people because of the blood of the polytheists he had spilled in the wars fought alongside the Prophet.

Therefore 'Alî was almost completely cut off from public affairs. He retreated to his house where he began to train competent individuals in the Divine sciences. It should also be mentioned that he never let an opportunity pass by in which he expressed his opinion about his right to the caliphate. On the other hand, his concern for the wellbeing of the Muslim ummah did not allow him to deprive the caliphs of his guidance whenever the opportunity arose. For example, there are countless judicial cases which were solved by Imam 'Alî during the caliphate of 'Umar bin Khattâb—many were cases in which 'Umar said, "If it hadn't been for 'Alî, 'Umar would have perished."

In this way 'Alî passed the twentyfour years of the caliphate of Abu Bakr (d. 13 A.H.), 'Umar (d. 23 A.H.) and 'Uthmân (d. 35) who came to power after the Prophet. When the third caliph was killed in a public revolt because of his unjust policies, people gave their allegiance to 'Alî and he was chosen as caliph.

5. Caliphate to Death

During his caliphate of nearly four years and nine months (35 AH to 40 AH), 'Alî followed the way of the Prophet and gave his caliphate the form of a spiritual movement and renewal, and began many different types of reforms. He forced the resignation of all the incompetent political elements who had a hand in directing affairs and began a major transformation of a "revolutionary" nature. Naturally, these reforms were against the interests of certain parties that had become used to the privileges during the previous caliphates and sought their own benefit.

As a result, a group of the companions (foremost among whom were Talhah and Zubayr, who ishah, and especially Mu'awiyah) made a pretext of the death of theĩ' also gained the support of third caliph to raise their heads in opposition and began to revolt and rebel against 'Alî. In order to quell the civil strife and sedition, 'Alî fought a war near Basra against Talhah and ishah, "the mother of the believers" was also involved. Actually this battle isĩ' Zubayr in which ishah was riding.ĩ' known in history as the " Battle of the Camel" after the camel on which Imam 'Alî fought another war against Mu'awiyah bin Abi Sufyân on the border of Iraq and Syria which lasted for a year and a half and is famous as the "Battle of Siffin." He also fought against the Khawârij at Nahrawan, in a battle known as the "Battle of Nahrawan." Therefore, most of the days of 'Alĩ's caliphate were spent in overcoming internal opposition. And so it is a sign of 'Alî's excellence that in spite of such great problems during his short caliphate, he has left behind a vast and rich legacy in form of sayings, letters, circulars and decisions on the political system of Islam. Finally, in the morning of the 19th of Ramadhan in the year 40 A.H., while praying in the mosque of Kufa, he was wounded by one of the Khawârij .and died as a martyr during the night of the 21st

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The Personality of 'Alî .6

According to the testimony of friend and foe alike, 'Alî had no shortcomings from the point of view of human perfection. And in the Islamic virtues he was a perfect example of the upbringing and training given by the Prophet. The discussion that has taken place concerning his personality and the books written on this subject by Shi'ites, Sunnis and members of other religious bodies, are hardly equaled in the case of any other personality in history. In science and knowledge, 'Alî was the most learned of the companions of the Prophet, and of Muslims in general. In his learned discourses he was the first in Islam to open the door for logical demonstration and proof and to discuss the "divine sciences" or metaphysics (ma'ârif-i ilahiyah). He spoke concerning the esoteric aspect of the Qur'ân and devised Arabic grammar in order to preserve the Qur'ân's form of expression. He was the most eloquent Arab in speech. The Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) said, "I am the city of knowledge and 'Alî is its gate." 'Alî was also without equal in religious asceticism and the worship of God. In answer to some who had complained of 'Alĩ's anger toward them, the Prophet said, "Do not reproach 'Alî for he is in a state of Divine ecstasy and bewilderment." Abu Darda', a companion of the Prophet, one day saw the body of 'Alî in one of the palm plantations of Medina lying on the ground as stiff as wood. He went to 'Alĩ's house to inform his noble wife, the daughter of the Prophet, and to express his condolences. The daughter of the Prophet said, "My cousin ('Alî) has not died.

Rather, in fear of God he has fainted. This condition overcomes him often."

There are many stories told of 'Alî's kindness to the lowly, compassion for the needy and the poor, and generosity and munificence towards those in misery and poverty. 'Alî spent all that he earned to help the poor and the needy, and himself lived in the strictest and simple manner. 'Alî loved agriculture and spent much of his time digging wells, planting trees and cultivating fields. But all the fields that he cultivated or wells that he built he gave in endowment (waqf) to the poor. His endowments, known as the "alms of 'Alî," had the noteworthy income of twenty-four thousand gold dinars towards the end of his life.

Mas'udi, the famous historian of third Islamic century, writes: "If the glorious name of being the first Muslim, a comrade of the Prophet in exile, his faithful companion in the struggle for faith, his intimate associate in life, and his kinsman; "if a true knowledge of the spirit of his teachings and of the Book; "if self-abnegation and practice of justice; "if honesty, purity, and love of truth; if a knowledge of law and science, "constitute a claim to pre-eminence, then all must regard 'Alî as the foremost Muslim. We shall search in vain to find, either among his predecessors (save one) or among his successors, those attributes".

7. Ali's Last Words'

When Ibn Muljim, the Kharijite, wounded Imam 'Alî bin Abi Tâlib (a.s.), the Imam gathered his family members and made a will to his sons Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn as a general advice for them and also for his followers. Some excerpts from that will is presented here: I advise you (both) and all my children and members of my family and everyone whom my writing reaches, to fear Allah, to keep your affairs in order, and to maintain good relations among yourselves for I have heard your grandfather (the Prophet) saying, "Improvement of mutual differences is better than general prayers and fastings."

Fear Allah and keep Allah in view in the matter of orphans. So do not allow them to starve and they should not be ruined in your presence.

Fear Allah and keep Allah in view in the matter of your neighbours, because they were the subject of the Prophet's advice. He went on advising in their favour till we thought he would allow them a share in inheritance.

Fear Allah and keep Allah in view in the matter of the Qur'ân. No one should excel you in acting upon it.

Fear Allah and keep Allah in view in the matter of prayer, because it is the pillar of your religion.

Fear Allah and keep Allah in view in the matter of your Lord's House (Ka'bah). Do not forsake it so long as you live, because if it is abandoned you will not be spared.

Fear Allah and keep Allah in view in the matter of jihâd with the help of your property, lives and

tongues in the way of Allah. You should maintain respect for kinship and spending for others. Avoid turning away from one another and severing mutual relations. Do not give up bidding for good and forbidding from evil lest the mischievous gain positions over you, and then if you will pray, the prayers will not be granted.