Eligibility for Imamat

Sura Al-Baqarah

(124) وَإِذِ ابْتَلَى إِبْرَاهِيمَ رَبُّهُ بِكَلِمَاتٍ فَأَتَمَّهُنَّ قَالَ إِنِّي جَاعِلُكَ لِلنَّاسِ إِمَامًا قَالَ وَمِن ذُرِّيَّتِي قَالَ لاَ يَنَالُ عَهْدِي الظَّالِمِينَ

And (remember) when his lord tested Abraham with words (of command) which he " .124 fulfilled. he said: ' verily, I have appointed you an Imam (leader) for mankind.' (Abraham) pleaded: ' and of my offspring (as well)? ' he, (Allah) said: ' my covenant does not include the : unjust '." Commentary

Imamat, the Climax of Abraham's (a.s.) Honour

From this verse on, the toimages of discussion are Abraham (a.s.), the honourable prophet of Allah and the hero of monotheism, the structure of the ka'bah, the sacred site of worship, and the importance of this great monotheistic center. these subjects are referred to in the next eighteen verses. three main ideas were the objectives of these verses:

The first aim was that they might provide people with the necessary preparation for the change of the direction of the Qiblah and to inform muslims that the ka'bah is a legacy of Abraham (a.s.), the idol-breaker. if pagans and idol-worshippers used it as an idol temple, it was only temporarily and it did not decrease the glorious high rank of the ka'bah at all.

The second goal was to address the problem of the jews and christians who were claiming to be the heirs of Abraham (a.s.) and his religion. these verses, reflecting back on the numerous former verses about the jews, clarify how very unfamiliar they were with the creed of Abraham (a.s.).

The third purpose was that arab pagans believed in a special incessant ancestral link between them and Abraham (a.s.). they, too, had to be made to understand that their belief systems and codes of behavior had no similarity with that of Abraham (a.s.), the iconoclastic prophet. In this verse, at first, it says:

" And (remember) when his lord tested Abraham with words (of command) which he fulfilled. ..." Yes, this verse speaks about the important occurrences in Abraham's life, i.e. his great tests and how he passed them successfully, which illustrates his high rank and superior personality and manifests the worthiness of his being.

When Abraham (a.s.) passed these trials successfully, Allah saw fit to give him a gift as a

prize. therefore, addressing him:

"...He said:' verily, I have appointed you an Imam (leader) for mankind.'..."

In order that this divine gift would continue in his seed, and prophethood and ' Imamat ' would not come to an end with his death: "... (Abraham) pleaded: ' and of my offspring? '..."

The answer to this question was :

"...He (Allah) said: ' my covenant does not include the unjust '." That is, i accepted your plea, but only for those of your offspring who are doers of righteous deeds and are pure and sinless i.e. .those who are worthy of this rank

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Explanation : What does ' Words ' Mean ?

Studying the verses of the Qur'an and noting the great and important deeds that Abraham (a.s.) fulfilled and, hence, being appointed to the position of Imamat by Allah, leads us to the conclusion that the term / kalimat / meaning ' words ', or the divine commandments by which Abraham (a.s.) was tried, were not those of the usual sort. it clearly indicates that the tests were not connected with matters of ordinary reasoning or faith. they can never be considered ordinary tests. the purpose of the ' words ' was a series of heavy, hard, laborious, grave duties which were given to Abraham, the sincere pure prophet (a.s.), and he was the only one who had the qualifications to successfully complete them. some of those commandments were such as the followings :

One trial was concerning the steadfastness of his faith in Allah. Abraham (a.s.) was commanded through a vision in a dream to slay his son ishmael. when he awoke, he unhesitatingly acted as he was bidden, (37: 105-108). this indicates that Abraham (a.s.) already knew that he was Allah's prophet and what he saw in the vision was no other than Allah's command. with such a certainty in his mind, he was willing to do, by Allah's command, something that no other loving or sensible father possibly could slay his own son.

In another incident, by Allah's command, he took and left his wife and his infant son to an area of dry land, where no food and water or any inhabitants could be found.

He also stood against the idol-worshippers of babylon and very bravely defended monotheism in his historical trial after he had broken their idols. he miraculously held firm in faith and patience when he was thrown into the midst of fire.

Recalcitrating, he emigrated from the land of idol-worshippers, and went to a faraway region in order to proclaim his prophecy. he did many things similar to those mentioned above and each of those trials was, indeed, heavy and difficult for a man to undertake, but he, with the power of faith, was able to perform them successfully thereby proving himself worthy of the position of '

.Imamat ', divine leadership

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Eligibility for Imamat

Precisely speaking, it is understood from the above mentioned verse that the position and rank of Imamat which was bestowed upon Abraham (a.s.), only after successfully enduring those frequent difficult trials, was above and beyond the rank of prophethood.

The primary sense of meaning of the term / Imam / is that of being foremost, but it also has other different meanings including:

A) leadership in the worldly social affairs of people, (as the sunnite school of thought believes).

B) Authority over the religious affairs of people in this world (as some others of them have interpreted).

C) Responsibility of bringing religious duties into action, whether it is through the establishment of government in its vast meaning or performing the commandments and ordinances of Allah, and the execution of social justice along with the training of souls, both outwardly and inwardly. the rank of Imamat is higher than the rank of prophethood, because prophethood and messengership is only a matter of receiving some commandments from Allah and preaching them as glad tidings and warnings. all of these are true in the case of Imamat, in addition to practicing the divine ordinances and training the souls of individuals, outwardly and inwardly. (it is clear, of course, that many of the prophets had had the rank of Imamat, too.)

Imamat, in fact, is the position of presenting the aims of religion practically, and guidance is ' attaining the ideal ' not merely ' showing the way '.

Besides that, Imamat includes ' divine guidance ', too. it means the innate quality of the Imam's spiritual influence and the attracting glow of his pureness encompassing, deeply touching, and truly effecting the realm of receptive people's hearts which results in their spiritual guidance.

From this point of view, an Imam is just like the sun that, with its life-giving light, fosters and gives vitality to all living creatures. the function of an Imam in spiritual aspects is the same as the physical function of the sun.

The holy Qur'an says: " he it is who sends blessings on you, as do his angels, that he may bring you out from the depths of darkness into light: and he is full of mercy to the believers ", (sura al-ahzab, No. 33, verse 43).

It is well understood from this verse that the special mercies of Allah and the hidden aid given by his angels can lead the believers and those who trust in him to come out from ' darkness ' into ' light '.

This is also true about an Imam. the innate authority of an Imam and the great prophets (a.s.) who had also possessed the rank of Imamat as well as their vicegerents, had a deep effect on receptive individuals by which they could train them and therefore bring them from the depths of ignorance and error into the light of guidance.

There is no doubt that the purpose of Imamat in this verse is the third meaning, because it is understood from many of the verses of the Qur'an that the concept of ' guidance ' lies within the meaning of Imamat, as sura as-sajdah, No. 32, verse 24 says:

" And we appointed, from among them, leaders, giving guidance under our command, so long as they persevered with patience and continued to have faith in our signs."

This guidance does not mean merely ' showing the way ', because, in principle, Abraham (a.s.) had the rank of prophethood and messengership for giving guidance in the sense of ' showing the way ' before becoming an Imam.

However, the Qur'an clearly attests to this fact that Imamat was bestowed on Abraham (a.s.) when he persevered with patience in tolerating the difficulties which he encountered as he paved the path of certitude alongside his faith, and passed his various great tests successfully. this rank was above and beyond the rank of guidance with the meaning of preaching glad tidings and warning people.

Therefore, guidance within the concept of Imamat is nothing save ' attaining the ideal ', cherishing the soul of religion and bringing forth training programmes for the individuals who are prepared to grasp them.

This meaning is cited in an expressive tradition from Imam sadiq (a.s.) which says: " verily, Allah, the blessed, the sublime, took Abraham (a.s.) as his slave before he took him as a prophet. and verily Allah took him as his prophet before he took him as a messenger. and Allah took him as his messenger before he made him a confident (khalil). Allah took him as a confident before he appointed him as an Imam. when he had brought all these things together in him: he (Allah) said: ' verily, i have appointed you an Imam (leader) for mankind'."

The Imam (a.s.) continued: " since this was something very great in the eyes of Abraham, he said: ' and of my offspring (as well)? ' he (Allah) said: ' my covenant does not include the unjust '."

The Imam (a.s.) concluded: " a stupid person cannot be the Imam of the pious." (1) this means that only those seed of Abraham (a.s.) who were pure and infallible were worthy of being Imam.

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Prophethood, Messengership, Imamat and their Differences

As it is understood from the verses of the Qur'an and various ideas existing in traditions and islamic literature, those who were commissioned by Allah had different ranks.

A. Prophethood means the ability to receive revelation from Allah. then, a prophet is one on whom the divine revelation comes down and whatever he receives by revelation he delivers to people.

B. Messengership means to preach the divine revelation, to spread the ordinances of Allah, and to train the souls and minds of individuals through education and acknowledgement. therefore, a messenger is he who is commissioned, by effort and endeavour and utilizing any acceptable and proper means available to him, to invite people unto Allah and his commandments in order to elicit an ideological, convictional, educational and mental transformation in them.

C. Imamat, means to guide and lead people. in fact, an Imam is he who tries to execute, actually, Allah's ordinances by acquiring the power necessary to organize a godly government; and if he is not able to organize a formal government, he does his best in carrying out the ordinances of Allah, both personally and socially.

In other words, an Imam is commissioned to execute Allah's commandments and assure their performance, while a messenger is commissioned to preach those commandments. again, in other words, a messenger shows the path but an Imam, besides his other heavy responsibilities which were pointed out before, paves the path for 'attaining the ideal '.

let it not remain unsaid that it is clear that many of the prophets, like the prophet of Islam (p.b.u.h.), were possessors of all three ranks. they had divine revelation bestowed upon them. they preached the commandments of Allah, and endeavoured in organizing godly governments for executing his ordinances, while they were training the souls of people according to their own religions.

In brief, Imamat is the essence of leadership in all aspects: materially and spiritually, physically and theologically, apparently and hiddenly. Imam is the chief of government as well as the leader of the society, a guide in religious affairs, and a teacher of ethics to train people both inwardly and outwardly.

It is the Imam who, with his mysterious spiritual strength, guides receptive persons forward along the path of inner development, instructs the ignorant ones with his ability and knowledge, and, by means of his government or other executive resources enforces the principles of justice. Imamat, the climactical rank of Abraham (a.s.)

In defining the reality of Imamat, it was made clear that a person may become a prophet or a messenger while he has not been appointed as an Imam. this position dem ands special eligibility in all aspects. it is the same position that Abraham (a.s.) attained after successfully

passing many difficult tests and proving his genuine worthiness; this being the last step of his development to qualify for that rank.

Some may imagine that the qualifications of an Imam is only that a person ' be worthy and a model '. they do not consider the fact that this condition existed in Abraham from the very beginning of his prophethood. furthermore, not only Abraham, but also all prophets and messengers, had had this epithet from the onset of their calling. it is for this reason that a prophet should be sinless since his deeds are considered as models. therefore, Abraham (a.s.), who was a prophet and messenger of Allah, was gifted the rank of Imamat by Allah after he passed his trials successfully and proved that he was worthy of it.

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Who is unjust ?

The objective meaning of the arabic word ' the unjust ' mentioned in this verse: " my covenant does not include the unjust " is not only ' being unjust to others '. but the term ' unjust ' (in contrast with the philosophical meaning of ' justice ' which means to set everything in its own proper place), here, is used with its broad sense of meaning. thus, committing an ' unjust ' act means that ' a person, an action, or a thing has been arranged in a situation which is not appropriate '.

Since the position of Imamat and the outward and inward leadership of people is an extraordinarily splendid position with many responsibilities, the committing of the slightest sin or disobedience disqualifies a person from attaining this rank.

So, in the traditions of ahlul-bait (a.s.) we see that, for proving the vicegerency of hadrat ali (a.s.) immediately after the holy prophet (p.b.u.h.), they have quoted this very verse as justification, indicating that others had been idol-worshippers before islam, in the age of ignorance, and the only person who did not prostrate before an idol, besides prophet muhammad (p.b.u.h.), even for a moment was ali-ibn-abitalib (a.s.) what unjust act is greater than that a person performs idol-worshipping! did luqman not tell his son: "o my son! join not in worship (others) with Allah: for false worship is indeed the highest worong - doing " ? (sura luqman, No.31, verse 13).

Hisham -ibn- salim, as an example, narrates from Imam sadiq (a.s.) who said: " surely, Abrahamwas a prophet but he was not an Imam until when Allah said: 'verily, i have appointd you an Imam (leader)for mankind '. Abraham pleaded: 'and of my offspring (as well) ? ' he (Allah) answered: ' my covenant does not include the unjust'. those who have worshipped an idol, they will not be an Imam (leader)."(2)

In another tradition, 'abdillah-ibn-mas'ud narrates from the holy prophet (p.b.u.h.)who said: "

Allah told Abraham: 'I do not give you my covenant (of Imamat) for the unjust of your children.' Abraham said: who are these unjust whom your covenant does not include of my offspring? ' Allah said: ' whoever prostrated before an idol, leaving me, I will never make him an Imam', and (hi is not worthy of being an Imam ..."(3

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An Imam, by Allah's commission

It is also understood from the current verse that an Imam (a sinless comprehensive leader of people) should be appointed by Allah. the reason is that: firstly , Imamat is a kind of covenant from Allah and it is evident that such a person should be ordained by him, the one who is the maker of the covenant.

Secondly, the persons who have eve tainted their lives with iniquity, even as small as a dark spot, whether it is against themselves of against others, or if there is a sign of idol-worshipping even for a short period of time in their lives, they are not eligible for Imamat, they should be perfectly sinless throughout their whole lives in order to become an Imam.

It is Allah who knows the hearts and minds of men and has given us criteria by which to evaluate them. this point will be discussed more comprehensively at a later time.

If we want to recognize the vicegerent of the prophet (p.b.u.h.), according to the above criterion, there would not be any one save amir-ul-Mu'mineen Ali (a.s.).

It is noteworthy that the writer of al-manar narrates from abu-hanifah that he believed the government of the time was exclusively suitable for the alawites. that was why he approved rebellion against their ruling government (which was headed by mansur of the abbasides). and it was also for the same reason that he did not agree, himself, to be in charge of the position of supreme court judge in the government of the abbasides.

Then, the writer of al-manar adds that the four kalifs of the sunnite school of thought all did not agree with the governments of their time, whom they did not approve as worthy chiefs of the muslims, because the governors were some cruel unjust ones.(4)

It is ironical that, in our time, some of the sunnite scholars approve and support the tyrannical governments whose relations with the enemies of islam are certain and definite, and their mischief and unjust acts are clear to all. but, this is insignificant compared to the fact that, they also consider them / 'ulul'amr / ' political and religious chieves' and / wajib ul 'ita'ah / ' .' necessary to be obeyed

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Two Questions

This fact should also be noted that the concept of Imamat does not necessarily mean that an Imam forcedly leads all people to the truth; but it means that people having their own free will, together with their potential for receptiveness and their eligibility, can take advantage of and use the Imam's quality of effectiveness in outward and inward leadership in order to be guided. It is just like we stated earlier, that the sun has been created to furnish light, heat and energy for all living creatures which have the potential to receive these bounties and are capable of development.

Another question that may be proposed is that according to the above commentary it seems that, every Imam previously must have been a prophet or a messenger and then be appointed as an Imam, whereas the sinless vicegerents of the holy prophet (p.b.u.h.) were not in such a position.

As an answer, we say that it is not necessary that the Imam, himself, be previously a prophet or a messenger and then reach that position. when his predecessor had the rank of prophethood, messengership and Imamat, (such as the prophet of islam (p.b.u.h.)), the eligible vicegerent can continue executing the duties of Imamat as an Imam. this situation occurs when a new messenger is not needed, like after the prophet of islam (p.b.u.h.), who is the seal of the prophets.

In other words, if the process of receiving divine revelation and communicating all the ordinance have been formerly performed and only the stage of their execution remains, the true successors of the prophet can continue the prophet's line of execution, and it does not necessitate that he, himself, be a prophet or a messenger.

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The distinguished personality of Abraham (a.s.)

Abraham's (a.s.) name is mentioned in the holy Qur'an in 69 occurrences which are gathered in 25 suras. in these verses, this great prophet (a.s.), whose worthy epithets are mentioned therein, is highly praised and appreciated by Allah from all aspects. he was a prototype, an example, of a complete human being.

The supremeness of his knowledge about Allah, his clear logical statements against idol-worshippers, his intense efforts and endeavours in challenging with the tyrants of his time, his dedication and forbearance in obeying the commands of Allah, and his unique perseverance against the storms of adventures and grievous trials, are all good examples for muslims, and those who pave the path towards Allah, to take and follow in their lives as their models.

As the Qur'an says about Abraham (a.s.), he was of the elect and good,(5) in the ranks of the righteous,(6) a model,(7) a man of truth,(8) most tender-hearted, and forbearing.(9)

furthermore, he was incomparably brave and extraordinarily generous as well. Allah willing, we will offer a more detailed explanation concerning this matter later when .commenting on some of the verses of sura ibrahim, No. 14, especially the last part of the sura

Notes

(1) Usul-Kafı, vol.1, chapter2 concerning the degress of the prophets (Nabiy),the messengers (Rasul), and the Imams (p.b.u.th.),p.133

(2) Usul-Kafı,vol.1, chapter:prophets and Messengers, Tradition 1.

(3) Al-Amali, by Shaykh Tusi, published in 1414, p.379

(4) Al-Manar, vol.1,pp.457-458

(5) Sura Sad, No.38 , verse 47

(6) Sura Nahl, No. 16 , verse 122

(7) Ibid. verse 120

(8) Sura Maryam, No. 19 , verse 41

(9) Sura al-Taubah, no 9, verse 114