

We said: "Messenger of God, should we not depose them when that happens?" but he said, "No, not so long as they keep the ritual prayers with you; not so long as they keep the prayers. When anyone has a ruler placed over him who is seen doing something which is rebellion against God, he must disapprove of that rebellion, but never withdraw his hand from obedience." (Ibid.)

*We cannot be certain exactly when those traditions were put into circulation, but we do know there were serious challenges to both the current Caliph and the office of the Caliphate itself in the wake of the conspiratorial murder of Uthman in 656 C.E. and the accession of the fourth Caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib. Ali was an early convert to Islam. He was, moreover, a cousin of the Prophet, the husband of his daughter Fatima, and the father of two of the Prophet's favorite grandchildren, Hasan and Husayn. Whatever his advantages, Ali appeared to many to be ambivalent about punishing the assassins of Uthman, the scion of one of the great pre-Islamic houses of Mecca. His hesitation gave his enemies in various camps—Muhammad's wife Aisha and Uthman's relative Mu'awiya prominent among them—an opportunity to drive Ali first out of Medina and then into a kind of Caliphate-in-exile in Iraq, where he had to fight to hold his office. Ali was himself assassinated in 661 C.E. by a schismatic. Over the succeeding years there grew up a body of the "partisans of Ali" (shi'at Ali) who attempted to vindicate not only his claims to the office of Imam but also those of his descendants.*

#### 18. The Ruler, Chosen by the People or Designated by God?

*With the rise of the Shi'ite movement—never quite politically powerful enough to seize the rulership in Islam but potent enough in its propaganda and ideology to threaten it—the rest of the "Sunni" community, so called because they supported "tradition [sunna] and the commonality," were forced to re-examine and defend their own positions on the nature of sovereignty in Islam. Here one of them, the essayist al-Jahiz (d. 886 C.E.), easily converts necessity into a virtue.*

... If we were to be asked, which is better for the community, to choose its own leader or guide, or for the Prophet to have chosen him for us? Had the Prophet chosen him, that would of course have been preferable to the community's own choice, but since he did not, it is well for it that he left the choice in its own hands. ... Had God laid down the procedure for the nomination of the Imam in a detailed formula with its own precise directions and clear signs, that would indeed have been a blessing, for we know that everything done by God is better. But since He did not make specific provision (for the office), it is preferable for us to

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strain God to establish an Imam according to a formula simply because  
in your view such a solution would be more advantageous and less trou-  
blesome, and better calculated to avoid error and problems? (Jahiz, *The*  
*Uthmanis* 278–279)

*This was the view of most historians, the Shi'ites of course excepted. At least one*  
*Prophetic tradition took no chances and put the choice of a successor directly in the*  
*Prophet's mouth.*

Aisha told that during his illness God's Messenger said to her: "Call  
me Abu Bakr your father, and your brother, so that I may write a docu-  
ment, for I fear that someone may desire to succeed me and that one may  
say 'It is I,' whereas God and the believers will have no one but Abu  
Bakr." Muslim transmitted this tradition. (Baghawi, *Mishkat al-Masabih*  
26.30.1)

*And again, with even more extended foresight:*

Jabir reported God's Messenger as saying, "Last night a good man  
had a vision in which Abu Bakr seemed to be joined to God's Messenger,  
Umar to Abu Bakr, and Uthman to Umar." Jabir said: When we got up  
and left God's Messenger we said that the good man was God's Messenger  
and that their being joined together meant that they were the rulers over  
the matter with which God had sent His Prophet. (Ibid. 26.34.3)

*We return to Jahiz.*

There are three different ways of establishing an Imam. The first way  
is as I have described [that is, following the overthrow of a usurper],  
or, second, under the kind of circumstances in which the Muslims put  
into power Uthman ibn Affan [Caliph, 644–656 C.E.], after Umar [Caliph,  
634–644 C.E.] had designated (a council of) six person of comparable  
worth and they in turn had elected one of their number. . . . A third  
possibility is the situation that prevailed when the community made Abu  
Bakr Caliph [632–634 C.E.]; the circumstances were different from those  
of Uthman's election, since the Prophet had not appointed a council as  
Umar did. . . . In Abu Bakr's case the community did not compare the  
respective merits of the Emigrants or announce the reasons for the supe-  
riority of the person elected; they were, after all, Muslims who had  
known each other intimately for twenty-three years . . . and so Abu  
Bakr's merits were immediately obvious to them; on the Prophet's death  
they had no need to form an opinion, since they already knew. (Jahiz, *The*  
*Uthmanis* 270)

*The developed Shi'ite view on this obviously crucial matter of the selection of the Imam or Caliph of the Muslim community is presented in the theological handbook called The Eleventh Chapter, written by the Shi'ite scholar al-Hilli (d. 1326 C.E.), with a commentary by another later author of the same name. The thesis is set out in the section devoted generally to the Imamate. In the passage immediately preceding our selection, Hilli had demonstrated that the Imam had of necessity to be immune to sin.*

The Third Proposition: It is necessary that the Imam should be designated for the Imamate since immunity to sin is a matter of the heart which is discerned by no one save God Most High. Thus the designation must be made by one who knows that the Imam has the immunity to sin necessary for the office, or else some miracle must be worked through him to prove his truthfulness.

[Commentary:] This refers to the method of appointing the Imam. Agreement had been reached that in appointing the Imam the designation can be made by God and His Prophet, or by a previous Imam in an independent way [that is, without the consent of the people]. The disagreement concerns only whether or not the Imam's appointment can be effected in any way other than by designation. Our fellow Imamites (Shi'ites) deny that absolutely, and hold that there is no way except by designation. For, as we have explained, immunity to sin is a necessary condition of the Imamate, and immunity to sin is a hidden matter, and no one is informed of it except God. In such circumstances, then, no one knows in whom it might be found unless He who knows the unseen makes it known. And that occurs in two ways: first, by making it known to someone else immune to sin, such as the Prophet, and then this latter tells us of the Imam's immunity to sin, and of his appointment; and second, by the appearance of miracles worked through his [the Imam presumptive's] power to prove his truthfulness in claiming the Imamate.

The Sunnis, on the other hand, say that whenever the community acknowledges anyone as its chief, and is convinced of his ability for the Imamate, and his power increases in the regions of Islam, he becomes the Imam. . . . But the truth is contrary to this for two reasons: first, the Imamate is a "Caliphate" [or "succession"] from God and His Messenger and so it cannot be acquired except by the word of them both; and second, the establishment of the Imamate by acknowledging someone as chief and by the latter's claim to the office would result in conflict because of the probability that each faction would acknowledge a different Imam. (Hilli, *The Eleventh Chapter* 186-188)

## 19. Ali, the First Imam

If, on the Shi'ite view, the Imam must be "designated" rather than simply "acknowledged," that condition must have occurred in the case of the very first of them, Ali ibn Abi Talib. The Fifth Proposition of Hilli's work takes up that much-disputed question.

The Fifth Proposition: The Imam after the Messenger of God is Ali ibn Abi Talib: First, because of his designation, which has been handed down in a number of distinct lines of Prophetic traditions; and second, because he is the best of his generation, by the word of the Most High . . . ; and third, because it is necessary for the Imam to be immune from sin, and there is no one among those who claim the office who is so immune except Ali, as all agree; and fourth, because he was the most knowledgeable (about Islam), since the Companions consulted him about their problems . . . ; and fifth, because he is more ascetic than any one else, so that he divorced the world three times.

*The first point is critical here, since the Shi'ite proposition of the Prophet's designation of Ali was confronted with the undeniable historical reality that the Muslim community was in fact ruled by three other men—Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman—before its choice fell upon Ali. This is how Hilli's commentator deals with that difficulty.*

[Commentary:] . . . There are differing opinions regarding the appointment of the Imam. Some claim that after the Messenger of God the Imam was Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib because he was his heir. And most Muslims affirm that he was Abu Bakr because the people chose him. And the Shi'ites maintain that he was Ali ibn Abi Talib because of the designation which came down directly from God and His Messenger to him, and that is the truth. And the author [that is, Hilli] has proved Ali's right in several ways: first, that unbroken tradition of the very words of the Prophet which the Shi'ites quote regarding the right of Ali, and from which certitude can be elicited, namely, "Greet him as the chief of the believers" and "You are the successor after me," and other words which prove what we intended, to wit, that he is the Imam. (Hilli, *The Eleventh Chapter* 191-192)

*To view the Shi'ite claims from the Sunni side of the Islamic community, we can turn to the popular theological manual by the Sunni scholar al-Nasafi (d. 1114 C.E.).*

The objection may be raised that it is related of the Prophet, upon whom be God's blessing and peace, that he once said to Ali, with whom

may God be pleased: "You are to me the same as Aaron was to Moses—on both of whom be blessings and peace—save that there will be no prophet after me." Now as the deputyship of Aaron admitted no possibility of substitution, so (the Shi'ites claim) is the case here (between Muhammad and Ali).

*The Sunni response is not to deny that the Prophet made the statement but to invoke the circumstances under which it was pronounced.*

The reply is that the Prophet's honoring him was not in the way you [that is, the Shi'ites] take it, for (it is common knowledge that) the Prophet, upon whom be God's blessing and peace, appointed Ali as his deputy over Medina while he went out on one of his raids, and as a result the evilly-disposed said: "Look, the Prophet has turned his back upon him and confined him to the house." This grieved Ali, so the Prophet said to him: "You are to me the same as Aaron was to Moses." Another indication (that their interpretation is false) is the fact that Aaron died before Moses, so it would only be sound if he had said: "You are to me the same as Joshua son of Nun," for he was the real successor to Moses.

*This was one of the contentions of the moderate Shi'a who looked upon Ali as the designated, and so the only legitimate successor to Muhammad. Others, however, would have put Ali above or beside Muhammad in the ranks of the Messengers.*

One group of the Rafidites [that is, one of the radical Shi'ite sects] teaches that the revelations (brought by Gabriel) were meant for Ali, with whom may God be pleased, but that Gabriel, on whom be peace, made a mistake. Another group of them teaches that Ali was associated with Muhammad in the prophetic office. All these are disbelievers for they disavow both the text of the Quran and the consensus of the community, for God has said: "Muhammad is God's Messenger" (Quran 48:29). Some of them teach that Ali was more learned than the Apostle of God and is in the position (with regard to him) that al-Khidr held to Moses [that is, the mysterious figure who serves Moses as mentor in Quran 18:66-83]. The answer to this is that saying of the Prophet which shows such knowledge as Ali had was from the teaching of the Prophet (who said): "I am the city of learning and Ali is its gate."

Another indication (of the unsoundness of their teaching) is the fact that Ali was a Saint but the Apostle of God was a Prophet, and a Prophet ranks higher than a Saint. As for al-Khidr, on whom be peace, he had direct knowledge (of things divine) for God said: "... whom We taught knowledge such as We have" (Quran 18:66). He means there inspired

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knowledge, but even so Moses was superior to him since he had a body  
 of religious Law and a Book, and he who has a religious Law and a Book  
 is superior. A case in point is that of David and Solomon, where David  
 is superior.

Another group of them teaches that there never is a time when there  
 is no Prophet on earth, and that this prophetic office came by inheritance  
 to Ali, with whom may God be pleased, and his progeny, so that anyone  
 who does not regard obedience to him (and his progeny) as an incumbent  
 duty is in unbelief. The truly orthodox people [that is, the Sunnis] teach  
 that there is no Prophet after our Prophet, for this is proved by God's  
 words "and seal of the Prophets" (Quran 33:40). It is related on the  
 authority of Abu Yusuf that the Prophet said: "If a pretender to prophecy  
 comes forward laying claim to the prophetic office, should anyone de-  
 mand from him proof (of his mission), he [the one who requested proof]  
 would thereby show himself to be in unbelief, for he would have dis-  
 avowed the text of Scripture." The same is true of anyone who has doubts  
 about him, for one demands a proof in order to make clear what is true  
 from what is false, but if anyone lays claim to the prophetic office after  
 Muhammad, upon whom be blessing and peace, his claim cannot be other  
 than false. (Nasafi, *The Sea of Discourse on Theology*)

[JEFFERY 1962: 445-446]

## 20. The Pool of Khum

*A more detailed version of how the Shi'ites explained the events surrounding the  
 designation of Ali as Imam is provided by al-Majlisi (d. 1700 C.E.). Although he  
 comes late in the tradition, he reproduces a standard Shi'ite contextual exegesis of  
 the Quranic passage in question.*

When the ceremonies of the (farewell) pilgrimage were completed,  
 the Prophet, attended by Ali and the Muslims, left Mecca for Medina. On  
 reaching the Pool of Khum he halted, although that place had never  
 before been a stopping place for caravans, because it had neither water  
 nor pasturage. The reason for encampment in such a place (on this occa-  
 sion) was that illustrious verses of the Quran came powerfully upon him,  
 enjoining him to establish Ali as his successor. He had previously received  
 communications to the same effect, but not expressly appointing the time  
 for Ali's inauguration, which, therefore, he had deferred lest opposition  
 be excited and some forsake the faith. This was the message from the  
 Most High in Sura 5:67: