

# Who are the Ahlul Bayt ?

BY THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST BENEFICENT, THE MOST MERCIFUL

## The Meaning of "Ahlul Bayt"

In Arabic, the term "Ahl" refers to the the members of a household of a man, but can also include one's fellow tribesmen, kin, relatives, wives, children, and all those who share a family background, religion, housing, city, and country with him. The word "Bayt" refers to "a habitation and dwelling," but may also include tents and buildings. Therefore, when literally translated, the term Ahlul Bayt means "People of the Household." In an Islamic context, however, it refers to the members of the Household of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny).

## Evidence from the Noble Qur'an

All Muslims believe that the Qur'an is Allah's final, infallible word. It is a perfect book in which all guidance has been revealed to mankind. As such, it is the foremost authority when it comes to matters of religion, and is always the first source Muslims turn to for guidance.

The term "Ahlul Bayt" has been mentioned twice in the Qur'an, once in reference to the family of Prophet Ibrahim (upon whom be peace) and once in reference to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny). The first verse is as follows:

... They [the angels] said: Do you wonder at Allah's bidding? The mercy of Allah and His blessings are on you, O People of the House, surely He is Praised, Glorious. [11:73]

This verse was spoken by the angels to Sarah, the wife of Prophet Ibrahim, when she asked how it was possible for her to bear a son when she had reached an extremely old age. The angels responded by declaring to her that she should not be distressed since Allah's special mercy and blessings were upon Prophet Ibrahim and his household, and that He would never leave them unattended.

The second instance where the Qur'an uses the term "Ahlul Bayt" is in reference to the family of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny).

... Allah only desires to keep away the uncleanness from you, O People of the House! and to purify you a perfect purifying. [33:33]

In this verse, known as the "Verse of Purification" (Ayaat at-Tathir), Allah, the Glorified, announces to

humankind that He has conferred upon the Ahlul-Bayt an exalted status that is unparalleled amongst His creation. Two other translations of this popular verse are given as follows:

[Yusufali] ... And Allah only wishes to remove all abomination from you, ye members of the Family, and to make you pure and spotless.

[Pickthall] ... Allah's wish is but to remove uncleanness far from you, O Folk of the Household, and cleanse you with a thorough cleansing.

The Arabic is as follows:

إِنَّمَا يَرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ  
وَيُطَهِّرَكُم تَطْهِيراً (٣٣:٣٣)

## Analysis

This verse reveals two important things. First, it shows that Allah, the Almighty, has Himself undertaken to purify the Ahlul Bayt with a "perfect/thorough purification." It is important to note that nowhere in the Qur'an is the same expression [تَطْهِيراً] used for any of Allah's creatures. It has not been used for any other Prophets, Messengers, or Angels of Allah, nor has it been used for any of the Companions of the Prophets. The Ahlul-Bayt have been given this status of perfect purification to the exclusion of all other creatures of Allah.

Secondly, the word "Rijs" has been used with the definitive article "al-" before it. In Arabic, the word "Rijs" means "impurity" but with the definitive article "al-" before it, it means "every kind of impurity." From this verse, Muslims have concluded that Allah has expressed His intention to keep the Ahlul Bayt pure and spotless, and according to the Qur'an, whatever Allah desires will happen:

And Our word unto a thing, when We intend it, is only that We say unto it: Be! and it is. [16:40]

## The Identity of the Ahlul Bayt

All Muslims agree that Allah, the Almighty, has given a special status to the Ahlul Bayt, but the schools of thought differ on who the Ahlul Bayt are. Allah, the Glorified, begins the verse of purification by addressing the wives of the

Blessed Prophet. For this reason, the Ahle Sunnah wa'l Jamaah hold that the term "Ahlul Bayt" includes all the wives, children, and near relatives of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny). For the Shi'a, however, the Ahlul Bayt consist of only the following:

- Prophet Muhammad
- Fatimah al-Zahra (AS)
- Imam Ali (AS)
- Imam al-Hasan (AS)
- Imam al-Husain (AS)
- Nine descendants of Imam al-Husain (AS)

A simple examination of the Arab text reveals a shift in the verse's style of address. The sentence in which the Ahlul Bayt are mentioned employs masculine gender, while the verses before and after it employ feminine gender. In the Arabic language, when a group of women are being addressed, feminine gender is employed. However, even if only one man exists among that group, masculine gender is used instead. Because of the shift from feminine to masculine gender, the Quran clearly shows that Allah is referring to a group other than the wives of the Prophet, and that group includes some male members.

## Evidence from Authentic Ahadeeth

In order to understand who the Ahlul Bayt really are, one must refer to the circumstances which prompted the revelation of this verse. In Sahih Muslim, there is a chapter entitled "Virtues of the Ahlul Bayt of the Prophet." Interestingly, there exists only one hadeeth in this section, known as the tradition of al-Kisa (the Cloak):

One day the Prophet (PBUH&HF) came out in the afternoon wearing a black cloak (upper garment or gown; long coat), then al-Hasan ibn 'Ali came and the Prophet accommodated him under the cloak, then al-Husayn came and entered the cloak, then Fatimah came and the Prophet entered her under the cloak, then 'Ali came and the Prophet entered him to the cloak as well. Then the Prophet recited: "Verily Allah intends to keep off from you every kind of uncleanness O' Ahlul Bayt, and purify you a perfect purification." [Sahih Muslim, Book 31, #5995]

Through this hadeeth, the author of Sahih Muslim confirms that the Ahlul Bayt refers only to Imam Ali, Fatimah, al-Hasan, and al-Husain and not to anyone else.

Other authentic ahadeeth state the case more

Behold! My Ahlul Bayt are like the Ark of Noah, whoever embarked in it was saved, and whoever turned away from it was drowned. [Al-Hakim]

emphatically. According to al-Hakim Nishaburi, Ahmed ibn Hanbal, at-Tabari, Tirmidhi, Bayhaqi, Suyuti, an-Nisa'i, Ibn Kathir, Tabarani, Fakhrud Deen ar-Razi, and many others, after the verse of purification was revealed, Umm Salamah, a pious wife of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) asked if she could enter under the cloak as well, to which he replied "You too have a good future but only these are the members of my family." The Prophet's rejection of Umm Salamah's request clearly indicates that the wives are not included among those who have been "perfectly/thoroughly purified." If they were, the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) would never have forbidden Umm Salamah from entering under the cloak.

### **More Evidence: The Incident of Mubahala**

In the 10th year of Hijra, a delegation of Christians from Najran came to visit the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him and his family) to clarify their religious and political position vis-a-vis Islam. During their discussion, verses 3:59-61 were revealed, which explicitly state that Jesus was a Prophet and a Messenger, and not divine as the Christians believed. Despite being presented with clear rational proofs that Jesus was not divine, the Christians refused to concede. At this point, the following verse descended upon Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny):

*But whoever disputes with you in this matter after what has come to you of knowledge, then say: come let us call our sons and your sons and our women and your women and ourselves and yourselves, then let us pray humbly and (solemnly) invoke the curse of Allah upon those who lie. [3:61]*

The Christians accepted the challenge, and the next day they appeared with their highest ranking priests ready to invoke maledictions upon the liars. On the side of Islam, the Prophet appeared carrying al-Husayn in one arm and holding the hand of al-Hasan with the other. Behind him was the Lady Fatimah, and behind her was her husband 'Ali b. Abi Talib. When the Christians realized that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him and his family) had placed the closest people to him at risk, they lost their confidence, withdrew their challenge, and submitted to a treaty with the Muslims.

This incident has been reported in dozens of authentic sources, such as Sahih Muslim, al-Mustadrak al-Hakim, Sunan al-Bayhaqi, Sahih Tirmidhi, and also by various Qur'an commentators, such as al-Zamashkhari, Baydawi, Fakhrud Deen ar-Razi, and many others. In this verse, Allah, the

Sublime, uses the plural form for "women "children" and "selves." In Arabic, the plural form is used to refer to three or more people. It is important to note that even though the Prophet had many wives, he did not allow any of them to represent his "women." He brought only his beloved daughter Fatima, her husband 'Ali, and her two children al-Hasan, and al-Husayn. If there were anyone superior in dignity, respect, or love to the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him and his progeny), he would have been required to include them as well. The fact that he did not proves that there is no one better in stature in the eyes of Allah than the Ahlul Bayt, whom Allah has himself purified with a "perfect/thorough purification."

### **Conclusion:**

According to the Qur'an and various authentic hadeeth accepted by all Muslims, Allah, the Majestic, has made the Ahlul Bayt the best of all His creation by purifying them from all sins. To this, it has been reported in an authentic hadeeth in al-Mustadrak al-Hakim that that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him and his progeny) said:

"The example of the members of my Household among you is like the example of Noah's ark. Whoever boards it will attain salvation and whoever does not board it will drown." [Vol. 3, Sahih al-Mustadrak]

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*At a Glance*



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