

Who are the Imams?

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

What is an Imam?

In Arabic, the word “imam” means “leader.” In common day Arabic usage, it can refer to anyone who holds a position of leadership. The one who leads the congregational prayers, for example, is called an “imam” as is the leader of a mosque or other Islamic institution.

In a more universal sense, the term “Imam” refers to one whose leadership has been made mandatory. Muslims belonging to the Ahle Sunnah wa’l Jammah have identified four Imams: Ahmed Ibn Hanbal (born in 164 AH), Al-Shafi’i (born in 150 AH), Malik ibn Anas (born in 95 AH), and Abu Hanifa (born in 80 AH). These imams were all acclaimed as very great jurists and honest and just men, yet they disagreed on many matters. For example, Maliki Muslims pray with their arms at their sides, while Hanafi, Shafi’i, and Hanbali Muslims will pray with their arms folded. As a result of such juridical differences, each scholar’s views produced a unique school of thought. The Ahle Sunnah wa’l Jammah believe that all four imams were correct in their different interpretations of the Qur’an and the ahadeeth, and that it is compulsory upon all Muslims to follow one of them.

The majority of the Muslims are unable to produce any argument to show which of these four jurists is the best. It is impossible to follow all of them, and therefore, before one can say that it is “compulsory” to follow them, one has to prove which one must be followed. A significant problem arises, however, when one considers the fact that the blessed Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him and his progeny) never mentioned these imams at all, nor did he proclaim that it was permissible to follow any of them. These imams, as great as they were, lived long after the life of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) and relied upon narrations from others to derive their juridical rulings.

Amongst Muslims, there exists group who follow the Imams of Ahlul-Bayt which include Imam ‘Ali, Imam al-Hasan, and Imam al-Husayn, (peace be upon them all), all of whom were contemporaries of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) and were raised in his household.

The obvious question to ask is: Who knew more about the Sunnah of the Prophet -- the four Ahle Sunnah imams who lived long after the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny), or the Ahlul Bayt who were taught directly from the Prophet himself? The followers of the Ahlul Bayt hold that there are twelve Imams in total. Each of these

Imams were, in their times, the most knowledgeable, the most illustrious, the most God-fearing, the most pious, the best in personal virtues, and the most honored before Allah; and their knowledge was inherited from their ancestor (the Prophet) through their fathers.

Why Twelve?

A question that is often asked is “Where did these twelve Imams come from and why should the number of Imams be twelve and twelve only? The answer to this question lies right inside Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, and the other authentic Ahle Sunnah collections.

Some Ahadeeth

Sahih al-Bukhari Hadith: 9.329
Narrated Jabir Ibn Samura:

I heard the Prophet saying, “There will be twelve commanders (Amir).” He then said a sentence which I did not hear. My father said, the Prophet added, “All of them will be from Quraish.

In Musnad Ahmed ibn Hanbal, the same tradition has been recorded as follows:

“The Prophet (PBUH&HF) said: “There shall be twelve Caliphs for this community, all of them from Quraish.” [Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, v5, p106]

In Sahih Muslim, the traditions are as follows:

Narrated Jabir Ibn Samura:

The Prophet (PBUH&HF) said: “The matter (life) will not end, until it is passed by twelve Caliphs.” He then whispered a sentence. I asked my father what the Prophet said. He said, the Prophet added: “All of them will be from Quraish. [Book #20, Hadeeth #4477]

The Prophet (PBUH&HF) said: “The affairs of people will continue to be conducted (well) as long as they are governed by the twelve men.” [Book #20, #4478]

The Prophet said: “This religion would continue to remain powerful and dominant until there have been twelve Caliphs.” [Book #20, #4482]

The Prophet (PBUH&HF) said: “The Islamic religion will continue until the Hour (day of resurrection), having twelve Caliphs for you, all of them will be from

Quraish.” [Book #20, Hadeeth #4482]

Similar references for this ahadeeth can also be found in Sahih Tirmidhi, Sunan Abu Dawud, and many others. In Arabic, the word “Caliph” means “successor.” The successor of the Prophet (peace be upon him) or the preceding Caliph, must come immediately after his predecessor. If there is any gap between the successors, the word “successor” does not make any sense. It is also important to note that in the above traditions, the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) declared that those twelve caliphs will last until the day of resurrection.

In another wording, the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him and his progeny) used the word “Imam” instead of “Caliph”. It is widely narrated that:

The Prophet (PBUH&HF) said: “The Imams are from Quraish. [Mustadrak al-Hakim, V.3, P. 149]

Other authentic ahadeeth that use the word “Imam” can be found in Musnad Ahmed ibn Hanbal, Sunan Bayhaqi, Sahih an-Nisa’i (reported from Anas b. Malik), and many others.

Who are these Twelve Imams?

A simple survey of Islamic history shows that these ahadeeth pertaining to “twelve Imams” could not have been referring to the first four “Rightly Guided” caliphs, since they were less than twelve. The same holds for the four Ahle Sunnah wa’l Jammah imams mentioned earlier. And they can not be applied to the Umayyad Caliphs, nor to the Abbasid Caliphs because:

- (a) they were more than twelve;
- (b) all of them were tyrants and unjust (except Umar Ibn Abd al-Aziz);

The followers of the Ahlul Bayt believe that these twelve Caliphs/Imams began with Imam ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and ended with Imam al-Mahdi, the Imam of the present age. They believe these twelve individuals were Imams because Allah, the All-Knowing, made them Imams and commanded obedience to them. With the passage of time and through historical events, we know that by the above traditions the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) meant the twelve Imams from his Ahlul Bayt because:

- (a) They were exactly twelve in number
- (b) They succeeded one another without any gap.

(c) There are no other twelve pure candidates upon whose righteousness all Muslims agree.

A Side Comment

How could the blessed Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him and his progeny) have been referring to these twelve Imams, when only two of them (‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and al-Hasan) ever physically governed?

The Qur’an clearly states that Allah, in His wisdom, appoints Prophets, Imams, and Messengers for humankind [see 2:124, 21:73, 32:24, etc.]. It is up to the individual whether or not to accept them as such. Allah, the Glorified, does not impose belief upon anybody. Human beings have complete free will to accept these Messengers and their communications as divine or to reject them. In either case, the status of the Prophet, Imam, or Messenger does not change. They retain their status in the eyes of Allah, it is only the people’s acknowledgement of them that changes.

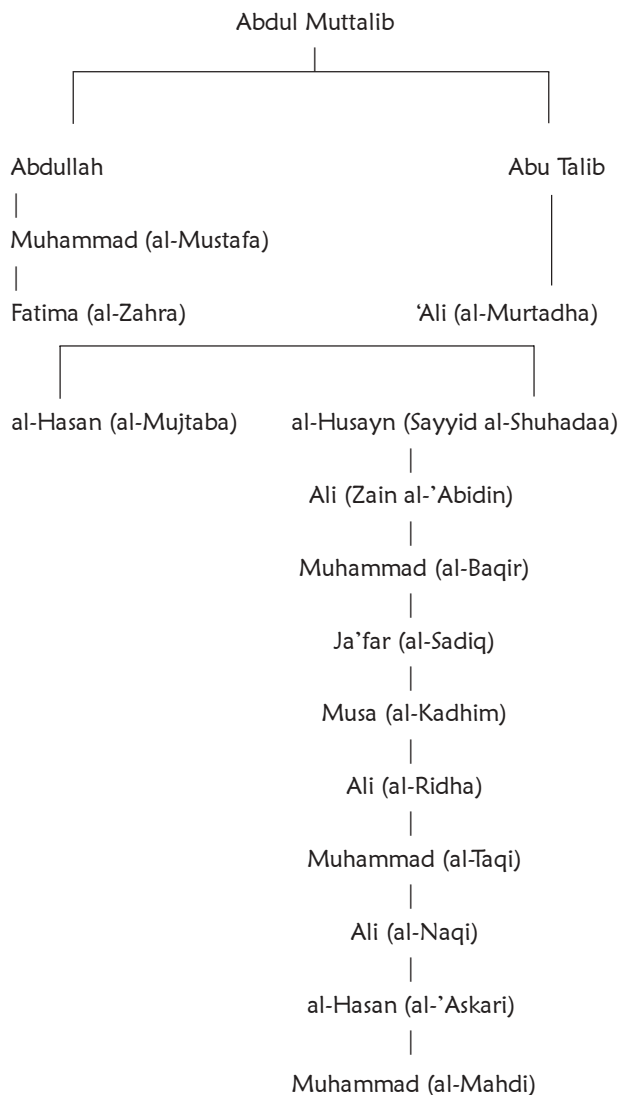
The Qur’an reveals that the majority of Prophets who were sent to guide mankind were oppressed by their own communities. John the Baptist (Yahya) was beheaded; Jesus was imprisoned, and Abraham was thrown into a fire. That their people did not acknowledge these Prophets did not alter the fact that they had been commissioned by Allah as divine leaders. In fact, the Qur’an relates the following about the Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him):

“And when Abraham was tested by his Lord with certain commands and he fulfilled them. Then He said: Lo! I appoint you as an Imam for mankind.” [2:124]

Allah made Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) an Imam only AFTER he had already become a Prophet and a Messenger. The people were charged with obeying him, yet they disregarded Allah’s command. This verse clearly shows that an Imam who is assigned by Allah need not physically govern in appearance. In this case, Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) remained a Guide for the God-fearing people, and still possessed complete knowledge of the commands and prohibitions of Islam, whether the majority of people chose to accept him or not.

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At a Glance



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