

The Principles of *Imāmah* in the Qur'ān

Learning Objectives

- Become familiar with important Qur'anic verses relating to *Imāmah*
- Understand that only Allāh (SWT) has the right to choose His representatives
- Understand that one of the essential attributes of an Imām is *'iṣmah*

وَرَبُّكَ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ وَيَخْتَارُ ۗ مَا كَانَ لَهُمُ الْخِيَرَةُ ۗ سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ وَتَعَالَى عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ

Your Lord creates what He will and chooses (for His tasks) whomsoever He will. It is not for them to make the choice. Glory be to Allah. He is exalted far above their associating others in His Divinity. [28:68]

Just as Allāh (SWT) created all beings, it is He Himself that appoints His representatives on earth. Human beings cannot choose their leaders themselves.

Before the creation of the first human being, Ādam (A), Allāh (SWT) informed the angels that He was going to appoint a vicegerent on Earth. Upon hearing this, the angels questioned this decision. Allāh (SWT) brushed aside their question, telling them that they do not have full knowledge regarding this matter:

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً ۗ قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ ۗ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

And when your Lord said to the angels, I am going to place in the earth a vicegerent, they said: What! wilt Thou place in it such as shall make mischief in it and shed blood, and we celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy holiness? He said: Surely I know what you do not know. [2:30]

If the great angels, who are error-free (*ma'ṣūm*), were given no say in the appointment of His caliph on Earth, how can fallible human beings expect to take appointing the leaders of the Muslims after the Holy Prophet (S) into their own hands?

In every case in the Qur'ān, Allāh (SWT) attributes the appointment of a caliph or Imām to Himself. Prophet Dāwūd (A) is another example:

يَا دَاوُودُ إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاكَ خَلِيفَةً فِي الْأَرْضِ

Oh Dāwūd! Surely We have appointed you a vicegerent on earth... [38:26]

When Prophet Mūsā (A) was entrusted with his mission to rescue the Banū Isrā'īl, he wanted to have the his brother, Hārūn as his helper and deputy. However, even though he was a prophet, he could not and did not select Hārūn for this role by himself. He had to seek Allāh (SWT)'s permission:

أَذْهَبَ إِلَى فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّهُ طَغَى ، قَالَ رَبِّ اشْرَحْ لِي صَدْرِي ، وَيَسِّرْ لِي أَمْرِي ،
 وَاحْلُلْ عُقْدَةً مِّن لِّسَانِي ، يَفْقَهُوا قَوْلِي ، وَاجْعَلْ لِّي وَزِيرًا مِّنْ أَهْلِي ، هَارُونَ
 أَخِي ، أَشْدُدْ بِهِ أَزْرِي ، وَأَشْرِكْهُ فِي أَمْرِي ، كَيْ نُسَبِّحَكَ كَثِيرًا ، وَنَذْكُرَكَ
 كَثِيرًا ، إِنَّكَ كُنْتَ بِنَا بَصِيرًا ، قَالَ قَدْ أُوتِيتَ سُؤْلَكَ يَا مُوسَى

He said: "O my Lord! Expand my chest for me, And ease my task for me, And loosen the knot from my tongue, (That) they may understand my speech; and appoint for me, from my household, someone who will help me bear my burden: Hārūn, my brother, Strengthen me through him, And let him share my task, So that we may glorify You much, And remember You abundantly. Surely, You have always watched over us." He said: "You are indeed granted your petition, O Mūsā." [20:24-36]

Prophet Ibrāhīm (A) went through a number of very difficult tests in his life. With each test that he passed, he was raised to a higher position with Allāh (SWT). He was appointed a prophet, then a special friend of Allāh (SWT) (*khalīl Allāh*) and then finally, in his old age he was appointed as an Imām.

He prayed to Allāh (SWT) requesting the great blessing of being an Imām to be granted to his progeny after him. Allāh (SWT) replied that those among his progeny who have ever been even the slightest bit unjust cannot receive this lofty position:

وَإِذِ ابْتَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ رَبُّهُ بِكَلِمَاتٍ فَأَتَمَّهُنَّ ۗ قَالَ إِنِّي جَاعِلُكَ لِلنَّاسِ إِمَامًا ۗ
 قَالَ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِي ۗ قَالَ لَا يَنَالُ عَهْدِي الظَّالِمِينَ

And remember that Ibrāhīm was tested by his Lord with certain commands, which he fulfilled. He said: "I will make you an Imām to the Nations." He pleaded: "Does this promise apply to my descendants also?" He answered: "My promise shall not reach the unjust." [2:124]

From the above verse, we can learn many things, most importantly:

- 1- Allāh (SWT) tells Prophet Ibrāhīm (A), "I will make you an Imām to the Nations", showing that Imāmate is a Divinely-appointed status.
- 2- Although Allāh (SWT) granted Prophet Ibrāhīm (A)'s wish for Imāmate in his lineage, He makes it clear that an unjust person cannot be given this position. Thus:
 - a) the Imām has to be a person who has never worshipped idols (even before Islam), as that would amount to being unjust to oneself. Imām 'Alī (A) was the only one from among the first four caliphs to fulfil this criterion.
 - b) anyone who has ever been unjust himself or others by committing sins cannot become an Imām. In other words, the Imām has to be sinless (*ma'sūm*). Once again, none of the first four caliphs ever claimed to be *ma'sūm* other than Imām 'Alī (A).

The sinlessness (*iṣmah*) of Imām ‘Alī (A) as one of the Ahl al-Bayt is clear from the following important verse in the Qur’ān. According to this verse, Allāh (SWT) has taken upon Himself to keep away from the Holy Ahl al-Bayt (A) any sort of spiritual impurity that would arise as a result of sinning:

...إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا

...Allāh only desires to keep away the uncleanness from you, O people of the House and to purify you a (thorough) purifying. [33:33]

Qur’anic Imamah

Learning Objectives:

- To become familiar with the meaning of verses 28:5-6
- To memorise versed 38:5-6

وَنُرِيدُ أَنْ نَمُنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتُضِعُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ أَئِمَّةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ الْوَارِثِينَ

“And We have intended to bestow (Our) favour upon those who were oppressed in the earth, and make them leaders (in faith) and make them heirs.” (28:5)

وَمُمْكِنَ لَهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنُرِي فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَامَانَ وَجُنُودَهُمَا مِنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَحْذَرُونَ

“And to grant them power in the earth, and to show Pharaoh and Haman, and their hosts, what they were dreading from them.” (28:6)

Commentary:

It is Allah’s will that the oppressed ones will be able to establish the worldly government eventually. There is no doubt that when Allah’s will is issued for a thing to occur, that thing will certainly be performed and no barrier can hinder it. The holy Qur’an says: “Whenever He wills a thing, He just commands it “Be” and it is.” (36:82)

These two verses (28:5 & 6) are expressive and hope giving. They are expressed in the form of Arabic present tense (which shows the continuation of action) and as a general law so that no one thinks it belongs only to the oppressed ones of the children of Israel and the government of Pharaoh. The verse implies that Pharaoh intended to disperse the children of Israel and destroy their power and greatness, but Allah intends them to become strong and victorious.

Pharaoh wanted their power to be in the hand of the oppressors forever but Allah (SWT) intended to give the government to the oppressed, and that is exactly what happened.

In these two verses from Sura Al-Qasas, Allah (SWT) has removed the curtain from His will concerning the oppressed and states 5 affairs in this ground which are closely connected to each other.

1. Allah intends to give them His bounties by saying: “And We have intended to bestow (our) favour, upon those who were oppressed in the earth.....”
2. Allah intends to make them leaders when He says: “.....and to make them leaders (in faith)....”
3. Allah intends to make them the heirs of the government of the oppressed, where He says: “.....and make them heirs.”
4. Allah gives them a strong and lasting government: “And to grant them power in the earth.....”
5. Allah showed their enemies that which they were afraid of and they had mobilised all their forces against them: “....and to show Pharaoh and Haman, and their hosts, what they were dreading from them.”

Such is Allah’s favour and grace unto the oppressed ones. But who are the oppressed, and what qualities do they have?

These verses do not speak about a private, local and limited program related to the children of Israel, but they are stating a general law for all centuries and the entire people and generations. The verse says: “*And We have intended to bestow (our) favour upon those who were oppressed in the earth, and to make them leaders (in faith) and make them their heirs.*” (28:5).

This is good news on the victory of the truth over the untruth and faith over disbelief.

This is good tidings for all the free men who seek for the government of justice and wiping out injustice and cruelty.

An example of the outward existence of Allah’s will was the actual government of the children of Israel and annihilation of the government of Pharaoh.

And a complete example was the government of the holy Prophet (SAW) and his followers after the advent of Islam. It was the government of the faithful, poor, indigent and purified oppressed people who were always mocked and despised by the Pharaohs of their time and were under their pressure, injustice and cruelty.

At last, by the hand of this very group, Allah (SWT) opened the gates of the castles of those kings and brought them down of the throne of power and humiliated the tyrants.

And a vaster example of it will be the advent of the government of justice and truth all over the world by the Imam of our time, Imam Al-Mahdi Sahebu Zaman (AF).

When Imam Mohammad bin Hassan Al-Mahdi (AF) would appear and Islam would be established in the whole world with his coming, the entire earth would be ruled by him and all the disbelievers will vanish from the face of the earth.

These verses are among the verses that clearly give the good news of the advent of such a government. Some Islamic traditions indicate that, commenting on this verse, the Imams of the Ahlul Bait (AS) have pointed to this great advent.

Qur'anic Imamah (part 2):

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ فِعْلَ الْخَيْرَاتِ وَإِقَامَ الصَّلَاةِ
وَإِيتَاءَ الزَّكَاةِ ۖ وَكَانُوا لَنَا عَابِدِينَ

*“And We made them leaders guiding (the people) by Our Command, and We revealed to them the carrying out of good deeds, and the establishment of prayer and giving of alms, and they worshipped Us (alone).”
(21:73)*

This verse generally refers to the rank of Imamah and leadership of great Prophets as well as a part of their important and valuable programs:

1. “And we made them leaders.....” This means that, in addition to the rank of Prophethood and messengership, Allah gave the rank of Imamah. Divine leadership is the last stage of development course of mankind which means the absolute leadership of people; material and spiritual, internal and external, physical and mental.

Similar to prophethood, imamah should be assigned by Allah (SWT). If imamah is gained by force and injustice, it is an invitation to hell. The Qur'an says: *“leaders (who) call to the fire....” (28:41)*. But when Allah (SWT) chooses a leader, that leadership is blessed. And it is also the path of the truth.

2. “.....guiding the people by Our Command.....” The guidance of prophets and imams is neither from their own accord nor by their own personal tastes, but it is guidance by Allah's command.
3. Ritual prayers and almsgiving (zakat) are 2 basic principles in all religions, since without prayer and almsgiving none reaches the rank of servitude. The verse says: “....and We revealed to them the doing of good deeds, and the establishment of prayer, and the giving of alms and they worshipped Us (alone).”
4. One can comprehend from this verse that religion is not separate from government. “And We made them leaders, guiding (the people) by Our command....”