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**Translated by
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This article offers a brief biography of the life of Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Sadiq, the sixth Imam, the distinctive features of his Imamate compared to other Imams, his educational achievements, and his political confrontations.

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A Biography of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (a)

Muhammad Nasir Husayni ‘Ala’i

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Abstract

Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Sadiq, the sixth Imam, was revered by both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims for his deep Islamic scholarship, piety, and academic accomplishments. This article offers a brief biography of his life, the distinctive features of his Imamate compared to other Imams, his educational achievements, and his political confrontations.

Although the Imam is most renowned as the initiator of Shi'a Islamic fiqh, called Ja'fari jurisprudence, his extensive knowledge in a variety of fields had a great academic impact on the people of his time, Tawhid al-Mufaddal, a compilation of his teachings, reflected his extensive knowledge, particularly on the wonders of creation. Moreover, given the grim political situation for 21 years under the rule of the second Abbasid caliph Mansur, he supported Shi'a uprisings and advised them to implement a suitable

approach to confront oppressors.

Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Husayn ibn Ali (a)

The sixth Shi'a Imam (a) was born on a Monday or Friday on the 17th of Rabi'ul Awwal 83 or 86 A.H. ¹ He was born on the same day the Prophet was born 136 years earlier.

His Name, Epithets, and Appellations

He was named Ja'far by his holy father, Imam Baqir (a). In response to Daris Kanani as to why he was called Ja'far, the sixth Imam responded, "Oh Daris! Your father ignorantly called you Daris, which is the name of an offspring of Satan, while my father out of knowledge named me Ja'far, which is the name of a brook in Heaven." ² His great father was Imam Muhammad Baqir (a) and his mother was Umm Farwah bint Qasim ibn Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr. His epithets are Aba Abdillah, Aba Isma'il, and Abu Musa. ³

His appellations are also al-Sadiq, Sabir, Fadil, Tahir, Qa'im, Kafi and Munji; the most famous one is al-Sadiq. As to why he was called al-Sadiq (the truthful), while all Imams are truthful in the real sense of the word, Imam Sajjad (a) is quoted as saying, "The dwellers of Heaven know Ja'far ibn Muhammad as al-Sadiq because a descendant of his called Ja'far would falsely claim to be Imam. That is why he is known as Ja'far al-Kadhhab (the liar)." ⁴ Ja'far al-Kadhhab attempted to present himself as the successor of Imam Hassan Askari (a). However, by Allah's grace, Imam Mahdi (a) would prove his false claim to the Shi'as. The distinction between the sixth Imam and this descendant of his through five generations proves his veracity.

The Distinctive Features of his Imamate

The turbulent lifetime of Imam al-Sadiq (a) began in 83 A.H. and ended in 148 A.H. He spent 31 years of his life in the presence of his holy father.

Compared to other Imams before and after him, the period of Imam al-Sadiq's Imamate is politically distinctive and noteworthy in two respects:

1. The great number of Caliphs during his Imamate

The sixth Imam was a contemporary of seven Caliphs, namely Hisham ibn Abdul-Malik (105–125 A.H.), Walid ibn Yazid Abdul-Malik (125–126 A.H.), Yazid ibn Walid ibn Abdul-Malik (126), Ibrahim ibn Walid ibn Abdul-Malik (70 years in 126 A.H.), Marwan ibn Muhammad known as Marwan Himar (126–132), Abdullah ibn Muhammad known as Saffah (132–137), and Abu Ja'far known as Mansur Dawaniqi (137–158). ⁵ No other Imam was a contemporary of this great number of Caliphs, and Imam Sajjad (a) and Imam Hadi (a) were contemporary with at most six Caliphs during their Imamate.

2. Different dynasties

In contrast to the political situations of other Imams, during the Imamate of Imam al-Sadiq (a), the Umayyad dynasty was replaced by the Abbasid one. Thus, his confrontation with the governments of his time, his backing the Shi'i uprisings, his advising the Shi'as to adopt an appropriate approach to confront tyrants, and so forth are noteworthy. The holy Imam (a) was not only active in the era of freedom, but he also lived under the extremely dictatorial and tyrannical regimes.

3. Training Students

In order to train his students, Imam al-Sadiq (a) made the most out of the time when there was no dictatorship and cruelty because the Abbasids and the Umayyads were in political conflict with one another over power.

In doing so, Imam al-Sadiq (a) followed in his father's footsteps. The school established by Imam Baqir (a) was expanded by Imam al-Sadiq (a). Students trained in this school include Hisham ibn Hakam, Muhammad ibn Muslim, Aban ibn Taghlab, Hisham ibn Salim, Mu'min Taq, Mufaddal ibn 'Umar, Jabir ibn Hayyan, Mu'alli ibn Khanis, Mu'awiyah ibn Ammar, and Ali ibn Yaqtin.⁶

Some of these students were so advanced and well trained that they were the pivots of their fields. For example, Hisham ibn Hakam wrote thirty one books⁷ and Jabir ibn Hayyan authored more than two hundred twenty books⁸ on various subjects, especially on rational and natural subjects and chemistry, which was called alchemy then. That is why Jabir ibn Hayyan is known as 'The Father of Chemistry.'

Imam al-Sadiq's students were not limited to Shi'as; rather, Sunnis also benefited from his knowledge. Many well-known Sunni leaders were directly or indirectly the Imam's students. Foremost among these leaders is Abu-Hanifah who studied under the Imam for two years. He talked of these two years as the foundation of his knowledge, saying, "Had it not been for those two years, Nu'man (Abu-Hanifah) would have been destroyed."⁹

The Imam's Breadth of Knowledge

The spread and modification of Shi'i Islam is indebted to the scientific endeavors of Imam al-Sadiq (a). On different occasions, the Imam made use of the political pressures in society caused by the transfer of power from the Umayyads to the Abbasids to revive the principles of Shi'i thought that the governments prevented their dissemination to define the injunctions of Islamic law (shari'a) and to elevate Shi'a Islam. Hence, the "twelver-Imam Shi'ism" is called "Ja'fari Shi'ism".

According to the renowned leader of the Hanafi sect, Abu-Hanifah, "When Mansur Dawaniqi summoned Ja'far ibn Muhammad (a), he told me, 'People are fond of Ja'far ibn Muhammad (a). In order to denounce him, think of some difficult questions.'"

So I thought of forty difficult questions. One day Mansur was in “Hayrah” and summoned me. When I went to him, I saw Ja‘far ibn Muhammad (a) sitting on his right side. Mansur turned to him and said, ‘This is Abu–Hanifah.’

‘Yes, I know him,’ he replied.

Then Mansur added, ‘O’ Abu–Hanifah! Share your questions with Abu–Abdillah.’

I started posing the questions. For every question I asked him, he explained all about my opinion, the view of people of Medina and the Shi‘i opinion on it. On some questions, he agreed with us, on others with people of Medina, and still on some others he disagreed with both of us. This way, I raised forty questions and he answered all. Reaching this point, I pointed to Imam al–Sadiq (a), saying, “[He is] the most knowledgeable of people, aware of their disagreements on Fatwas and jurisprudential issues.”[10](#)

According to the famous scholar of the 3rd century A.H., Abu–Bahr Jahizh, “Ja‘far ibn Muhammad (a) is a person whose knowledge is world–famous. It is said that Abu–Hanifah and ‘Uthman Thawri were his students. This suffices for demonstrating his high scholarly status.”[11](#)

Besides strengthening the principles of Shi‘i thought, Imam al–Sadiq (a) particularly endeavored to refute the principal thoughts of other sects. In a debate between him and Abu–Hanifah, he refuted the analogical reasoning of Abu–Hanifah.

The Imam said, ‘I have heard you issue an Islamic ruling (fatwa) based on analogical reasoning.’

‘Yes.’

‘Woe to you! The first one who expressed ideas based on analogical reasoning was Satan. When Allah ordered him to prostrate himself before Adam, he said, ‘I will not, because You have created me out of fire and him out of soil, and fire is superior to soil.’

Then, in order to invalidate ‘analogical reasoning’, the holy Imam mentioned some instances of Islamic legal rulings opposed to this principle. He said, “Which one is worse, killing somebody unjustly or committing adultery?”

“Killing someone unjustly.”

“Now if acting upon analogical reasoning is to be correct, why are two witnesses enough to convict somebody of murder, but four are necessary for convicting somebody of adultery? Is this Islamic ruling in accordance with analogical reasoning?”

“No.”

“Which one is more important, prayer or fasting?” “Prayer.”

“So why is it incumbent on menstruating women to make up for obligatory fasting, while this is not the case with obligatory prayer? Is this Islamic ruling concurrent with analogical reasoning?”

“No.”

“I was told you have commented on this Quranic verse, “Verily you shall be questioned about the blessings on the Day of Judgment,” as follows, “Allah will rebuke people for eating delicious foods and drinking cold water in the summer.”

“Yes, I have commented on it this way. If somebody invites you over and serves you delicious food and cold water, then he reproaches you for having entertained you, what will you think of him?”

“I will consider him ungenerous.” “Is Allah ungenerous?”

“So what is meant by the blessings about which man will be questioned?”

“This blessing is the love for us, the Prophet’s Household (a).”[12](#)

Tawhid of Mufaddal: a Reflection of the Imam’s Knowledge

Mufaddal ibn ‘Umar Kufi was a student of Imam al–Sadiq (a) who was instructed by the Imam for four days and compiled the Imam’s teachings in the form of a treatise called Tawhid of Mufaddal. This book includes complicated and hidden facts about the world from humankind to astronomy.

I am going to tell you about the Divine philosophy in creating the universe, with its animals, wild ones, and insects; that is, all living beings, animals and plants, from fruit trees to the edible and inedible plants, so that [people] may learn a lesson.

Afterwards, the Imam spoke of the wonders of creation as Mufaddal wrote them down.[13](#)

Imam al–Sadiq’s Confrontation with the Tyrants of his Time

The Imam spent 21 years of his Imamate under the tyrannical rule of the second Abbasid caliph, Mansur. The struggle strategies the Imam recommended to his followers included adopting a non–violence policy, covert and overt struggle and defensive policies, showing the Shi’as the appropriate policy of not cooperating with the government, supporting the Shi’a uprisings while not helping those who wanted to align Imam al–Sadiq (a) with themselves.[14](#)

Each above–mentioned strategy is beyond the constraints of this paper. However, part of the Imam’s struggle was based on not recognizing any illegitimate government. According to Imam al–Sadiq (a), a legitimate government has its roots in Allah’s order, not in social contract, coercion, and the like.

For example, consider the following valid narration reported by ‘Umar ibn Hanzhalah. It is considered

accepted (maqbul) by some scholars due to the reliability of its chain of authorities; some others consider it a sound hadith. 'Umar ibn Hanzhalah related:

Imam al-Sadiq (a) was asked about two Shi'as who had a dispute over debt and inheritance, and turned to the illegitimate ruler or judge for a verdict on it. He was asked if this (turning to them) was allowed.

The Imam (a) replied, "Whoever turns to the illegitimate ruler or judge whether rightfully or not and asks him for a verdict definitely asks taghut (false deity) for a verdict. Also, it is wrong that he should accept something by the verdict of Taghut even though it is his vested right because he enjoys it by the judgment of Taghut. Allah has ordered people to disbelieve in Taghut. He said in the Holy Quran:

"They want to turn for judgment [in their disputes] to Taghut, though they were ordered to disbelieve in him," (4:60).

The Imam (a) was asked again, "So what should they do?"

He responded, 'They should turn to somebody who narrates our Hadiths, takes our halal and haram into account and knows our injunctions. Whatever verdict he gives, they should be content with it because I have appointed him a judge. So if they belittle his verdict which is based on our injunctions, they definitely underestimate the verdict of Allah and deny us. Whoever denies us actually denies Allah and this is tantamount to associating somebody with Allah.'¹⁵

In the above-mentioned narration, Imam al-Sadiq's saying is well- documented by his referring to the divine word.¹⁶

Considering the verses before and after it, that is, verses 58-68, the Qur'anic verse Imam al-Sadiq (a) mentioned enjoys a unique theme. If we consider all 10 verses together, it will be made completely clear that the rule of Taghut and turning to him are illegitimate and unlawful. In some parts of these verses,¹⁷ Allah even swears by Himself, and He sees those who ask somebody other than the

Messenger of Allah for a verdict on their disputes as faithless. In some other part, He views the faith of those who accept the judgment of Taghut as imaginary. In a nutshell, Allah regards turning to taghut and submitting to him as false and wrong.

In this narration, Imam al-Sadiq (a) extended this Qur'anic verse beyond the time of the Holy Prophet¹⁸ to the future. Thus, when Shi'a have dispute over an issue and there is no Infallible (a), they should turn to a jurisprudent because three characteristics, namely narrating hadiths, taking halal and haram into account and knowing the injunctions, are not consistent with qualities of anybody but jurisprudents. Therefore, as for the time when there is an Imam but he is inaccessible or when he is in occultation, the permanent ruling has been made clear.

The word 'taghut' from the root of 'tughyan', means rebelling against Allah and breaking divine laws, or any means of revolt and rebellion against Allah.¹⁹

Imam al-Sadiq (a) is also quoted as saying, “Whoever does not judge by right and truth, and people seek his judgment, is considered a taghut.”[20](#)

Another hadith by the sixth Imam reads as follows, “We are those obeying whom Allah has made obligatory, while you obey the one for whose ignorance people cannot provide any pretext before Allah.”[21](#)

The sixth Imam also warned jurists and hadith narrators against having any tie with the illegitimate government of that time, saying, “Jurists are the trusted agents of the Prophets. If you see them turning to the kings and intimately cooperating with oppressors, be suspicious of them and do not trust them.”[22](#)

Imam al-Sadiq (a) prevented his companions from associating and cooperating with the court of the caliphate. Once a companion asked him, “Sometimes Shi‘as become poor and short of money, and they are offered to build houses and dig a canal for the Abbasids. What do you think of this job?”

The Imam replied, “I do not like to tie a knot or to put a lid on water– skin for them even though they pay a high wage, because those who help the oppressors will be thrown into a tent of fire until Allah gives His verdicts on all servants.”[23](#)

Once Abu-Ja‘far Mansur wrote to the sixth Imam, “Why don’t you come to us like others?”

In response, Imam al-Sadiq (a) wrote, “We do not have anything worldly to be fearful of you for it. You do not have anything otherworldly either so that we pin our hopes on you for it. You do not enjoy any blessing so that we congratulate you on it, nor do you find yourself in an affliction and catastrophe so that we offer you condolence. So why do we come to you?”

Mansur wrote in response, “Come and give us advice.”

The Imam responded, “The people fond of this world do not give you advice, and the Godly people who care about the hereafter do not come to you either.”[24](#)

The Manifestation of Imam al-Sadiq’s Political Movement in Zayd’s Uprising

Zayd ibn Ali ibn Husayn ibn Ali ibn Abi-Talib was born in 79 A.H. and was martyred on the second of Safar[25](#) 121 A.H. [and based on another account 122 A.H.][26](#) in Kufa at the age of 42. He was a great and virtuous man of the Prophet’s household. He was also a knowledgeable, pious and brave ascetic who lived in the Umayyad era. It is said that he was the student of Wasil ibn ‘Ata, the founder of the Mu‘tazilites.[27](#) A sect with its specific beliefs is also attributed to him. Among them are beliefs in two Imams at the same time and the possibility of giving priority to the less qualified (mafdul) when there is a more qualified (fadil) candidate for caliphate.[28](#)

He was among those who believed in armed uprising against the tyrannical rulers and was martyred due to his belief; that is why he was known as “Martyred Zayd.”^{[29](#)} Considering the character of Zayd and his measures, it can be said with certainty that the Zaydiyyah sect is not connected with his beliefs at all.^{[30](#)}

Imam al-Sadiq and Zayd’s Uprising

In line with his political struggles against the tyrannical rule, Imam al-Sadiq (a) supported Zayd’s uprising; it even occurred with the Imam’s permission. There is evidence that demonstrate this including the following: Imam Rida (a) said, “My father Musa ibn Ja’far (a) quoted his father, Ja’far ibn Muhammad (a), as saying, ‘Zayd consulted me about his uprising and I told him, ‘Oh My uncle! If you would like to be the very person hanged in Kinasih (Kufah), this is your path.’ When Zayd left the holy Imam, Imam al-Sadiq (a) said, ‘Woe to anybody who hears his call and does not rush to help him.’”^{[31](#)}

Imam Rida (a) said, “Zayd was a scholar of the Prophet’s household. He was enraged for the sake of Allah and fought with enemies of Allah until he was martyred. My father quoted his father as saying, ‘May Allah bless my uncle, Zayd, who invited people to believe in the Prophet’s household. If he triumphed, he would put his words into practice.’”^{[32](#)}

Talking to a companion of Zayd who had killed six Umayyad soldiers along with Zayd, Imam al-Sadiq (a) said, “May Allah consider me one of those who killed them. By Allah, my uncle, Zayd followed in the footsteps of Imam Ali (a) and his companions.”^{[33](#)}

After Zayd’s martyrdom, Imam al-Sadiq (a) served as the guardian of his family. Through one of his companions, he also sympathized with the families of martyrs and helped them financially.^{[34](#)}

Zayd himself did not hide his devotion to the Prophet’s household. On different occasions, he expressed his love, devotion, and obedience to his brother and nephew. Consider the following:

According to Zayd, “Ja’far ibn Muhammad (a) is our Imam, determining halal and haram.”^{[35](#)}

Zayd also said, “In every age, somebody from among us – the Prophet’s household – is a hujjat (Proof) of Allah. The Hujjat of Allah in our time is my nephew, Ja’far ibn Muhammad (a). Whoever follows him will not go astray, and whoever opposes him will not be guided.”^{[36](#)}

Despite all the Infallibles’ support for Zayd and their emphasis on his character, they did not back him openly because Zayd’s uprising had to occur prudently while taking all precautions. The enemies might have heard about the Imam’s intervention and his agreement with Zayd’s uprising. Neither the Imam and Zayd nor his close companions wanted anybody to be informed about it.

There is no doubt that Zayd rose to avenge the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (a). He viewed reviving the obligation of enjoining good and forbidding evil as the main objective of his uprising. His sincere uprising led to the Imam’s support. This way, Imam al-Sadiq (a) showed future generations that struggle against

the tyrannical rulers is a fundamental principle, though it takes different forms over time.

The Imam's Martyrdom

According to historians, Imam al-Sadiq (a) was martyred by the poisonous grapes Mansur had him eat. Um Hamidah is quoted as saying, "On his deathbed, the holy Imam gathered all his relatives. When everybody showed up, he said, 'Our intercession does not go to somebody who belittles the daily prayers and is heedless to it.'" ³⁷

Nonetheless, Imam al-Sadiq was martyred on the 25th of Shawwal in the year 148 A.H. at the age of 63. ³⁸

The news of Imam al-Sadiq's martyrdom spread over the Muslim land, and true Shi'as shed tears over his martyrdom. He was buried in Baqi' cemetery next to the graves of his holy father and grandfather.

- ¹. The Virtues of Abi Talib's Household, Ibn Shahr Ashub, vol. 4, pp. 279-280
- ². Bihar-ul-Anwar, Allameh Majlisi, vol. 47, p. 27.
- ³. The Virtues of Abi Talib's Household, vol. 4, p.281.
- ⁴. 'Illal-u-Sharayi', Shaikh Saduq, vol. 1, p. 234.
- ⁵. The History of the Caliphs, Suyuti, pp. 281-312.
- ⁶. Imam al-Sadiq (a) and the Four Islamic Sects, vol. 1, pp. 69-77.
- ⁷. Rijal, Khu'i, vol. 19, p. 271.
- ⁸. Al-Fihrist, pp. 420-423.
- ⁹. Imam al-Sadiq (a) and Four Islamic Sects, vol. 1, p. 70.
- ¹⁰. Bihar-ul-Anwar, vol.47, pp. 217-218
- ¹¹. Imam al-Sadiq (a) and the Four Islamic Sects, vol. 1, p. 55.
- ¹². See its details in Bihar-ul-Anwar, vol.10, p. 220-221, no. 20.
- ¹³. The Conduct of the Shi'a Leaders, Mahdi Pishwa'i, pp. 353-410.
- ¹⁴. Wasa'il-ul- Shi'a, Hurr Ameli, vol. 18, p. 99, Hadith no. 1.
- ¹⁵. Nisa', 65.
- ¹⁶. The example of Signs on the Occasions of the Revelation of the Quranic verses, Dr. Muhammad Baqir Muhaqqiq, pp. 215-216; Nemuneh Quranic Commentary, vol. 3, pp. 429,453, 445.
- ¹⁷. Nemuneh Quranic Commentary, vol. 3, p. 443.
- ¹⁸. ibid.
- ¹⁹. Usul Kafi, Kulayni, vol. 1, p.186, Hadith no. 3.
- ²⁰. Imam al-Sadiq (a) and the Four Islamic Sects, vol. 2, p. 21
- ²¹. Wasa'il-ul- Shi'a, vol. 12, p. 129, Hadith no.6
- ²². Bihar-ul-Anwar, vol.47, p. 184.
- ²³. Nemuneh Quranic Commentary, vol. 3, p. 456.
- ²⁴. Irshad, Shaikh Mufid, vol. 2, p.170.
- ²⁵. Al-Milal wa-Nihal, Shahrestani, translated, Mustafa Khaliqdar Hashemi, vol. 1, p. 203.
- ²⁶. ibid, pp. 202-205.
- ²⁷. Nasikh-u-Tawarikh, Abbas Quli-Khan Sepehr, vol. 2, p. 42.
- ²⁸. Ya'qubi History, vol. 2, pp. 296-299; Tabari History, vol. 10, p. 4265-4267.
- ²⁹. Islamic Revolution and its Roots, Amid Zanjani, p.134.
- ³⁰. For further information, see the related history books with detailed accounts on Zayd's uprising. 'Oyun Akhbar-u-Rida,

Shaikh Saduq, vol. 1, p. 255, section 25; cited in The Conduct of the Shi'a Leaders, p. 408.

[31.](#) 'Oyun Akhbar-u-Rida, Shaikh Saduq, vol. 1, p. 248.

[32.](#) Bihar-ul-Anwar, vol. 46, p. 172.

[33.](#) Rijal-ul-Hadith, vol.3, p. 348.

[34.](#) Ikhtiyar Ma'rifa-tu-Rijal, Shaikh Tusi, p. 361; cited in The Conduct of the Shi'a Leaders, p. 409.

[35.](#) Thawab-ul-'Amal, p.530.

[36.](#) Muntakhab-u-Tawarikh, p. 428.

[37.](#) The Virtues of Abi Talib's Household, vol. 4, p. 280.

[38.](#) Bihar-ul-Anwar, vol. 47, p. 1. There is variance among historians over the date of his martyrdom and age.

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