

Imamate and Wilayah Part 5

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Mohammad Ali Shomali

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Authors(s):

[Mohammad Ali Shomali](#) [1]

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Mohammad Ali Shomali

This paper is based on lecture 12 of a series of lectures delivered by Dr Mohammad Ali Shomali in summer 2004 in Qum.

Abstract

Having a leader and a guide who draws people nearer to righteousness is a blessing and grace of God. The concept of Imamate in Shi'i Islam deems it necessary to have a guide who will lead the Muslim society after the Prophet's death by presenting true Islam as well as being a political leader. This guide is appointed by God and possesses qualities of piety, knowledge, wisdom, and infallibility.

Part 4 of this series verified that the Shi'a understanding of Imamate is compatible with the Qur'an in that God refers to Himself as having rule, governance, sovereignty, and the power to choose, and people are asked to obey Him, the Prophet, and those "*vested with authority among the people*" (i.e. the infallibles). This part studies the group of verses that refer to the profound concept of *witness*, including his roles and qualities. According to these verses, there must be a witness amongst every generation of people. The Qur'an indicates that the witness who followed Prophet Muhammad (s) was from him and had knowledge of the Book; these qualities can only be found in Imam Ali (a).

As described in the previous part, in the Qur'an, God refers to Himself as having rule (*amr*), governance (*hukm*), full sovereignty (*mulk*), and the power to choose (*ikhtiyar*). He is our guardian (*wali*) and He is to be obeyed (*ta'ah*). These attributes ascertain His sole power to choose and legitimize a leader, because He gives it to whomever He pleases. People are asked to obey Him, the Prophet, and those “*vested with authority among the people*” i.e. the infallibles. These verses without a doubt verify that the Shi'a understanding of Imamate is compatible with the Qur'an.

Part 1: The Concept of Witness in the Qur'an

According to the Qur'an, the most outstanding groups of people are those upon whom God has bestowed His blessings, and every Muslim at least ten times a day in his prayers asks God to guide him towards their path, the Right Path (1:6 & 7). These groups are four:

وَمَنْ يُطِيعِ اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصِّدِّيقِينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَالصَّالِحِينَ ۚ وَحَسُنَ أُولَٰئِكَ رَفِيقًا

All who obey God and the messenger are in the company of those on whom is the Grace of God, – of the prophets (who teach), the most truthful, the witnesses (who testify), and the Righteous (who do good): Ah! what a beautiful Fellowship! (4:69)

Thus, the witnesses come in rank in line with the prophets and the most truthful. Indeed, many witnesses were Prophets and all witnesses were undoubtedly truthful. Several verses in the Qur'an refer to who these witnesses are:

وَيَوْمَ نَبْعَثُ مِنْ كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا ثُمَّ لَا يُؤْذَنُ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَلَا هُمْ يُسْتَعْتَبُونَ

One Day We shall raise from all Peoples a Witness: then will no excuse be accepted from Unbelievers, nor will they receive any favours. (16:84)

On the Day of Judgement, when all nations will be brought before Allah, a witness will come from each nation; hence, there is no nation without someone acting as a witness over them. This witness points out the right way and will testify that that divine message was clearly conveyed to all peoples, in addition to the divine signs witnessed in nature. There will then be no room for any excuses. For this reason, the Qur'an says: “***No excuse will be accepted from Unbelievers, nor will they receive any favours.***” The Qur'an also says:

فَكَيْفَ إِذَا جِئْنَا مِنْ كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ بِشَهِيدٍ وَجِئْنَا بِكَ عَلَىٰ هَٰؤُلَاءِ شَهِيدًا

So how shall it be, when We bring from every nation a witness and We bring you as a witness to them? (4:41)

وَيَوْمَ نَبْعَثُ فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا عَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ ۚ وَجِئْنَا بِكَ شَهِيدًا عَلَى هَؤُلَاءِ ۚ وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ تِبْيَانًا لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً وَبُشْرَى لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ

One day We shall raise from all Peoples a witness against them, from amongst themselves: and We shall bring thee as a witness against these (thy people): and We have sent down to thee the Book explaining all things, a Guide, a Mercy, and Glad Tidings to Muslims. (16:89)

Thus, the Qur'an clearly indicates that a witness must be a human being from amongst the people themselves, a witness who understood them and was known to them. This verse also confirms that the Prophet Muhammad (s) will be witness against the people who lived during his mission. He will be a witness against those who believed in him and the Book he brought, and against those who rejected him and his message.

The roles of a witness

The roles and characteristics of witnesses are as follows:

God's Hujjah

Although *hujjah* is often translated as a proof or argument, it technically means something or someone that helps you to understand the will of God. Anything or anyone that can be trusted in understanding the will of God or any person is a *hujjah*. A *Hujjah* can be used by people to defend their position if they have acted according to him. On the Day of Judgment, both Allah and His servants refer to the *hujjah*. Allah asks and judges us according to the *hujjah* He provided us with.

The main *hujjah* are our intellect ('*aql*) and the Prophets (a) who have received divine message for mankind through revelation. Since there must be a *hujjah* in each age, the Imams are a *hujjah* after Prophet Muhammad.

Thus, the witnesses are people who can be taken as a *hujjah*. By looking at them and considering what they do and say, you can have good *hujjah* to justify your conduct. For example, Allah says:

وَيَوْمَ يُنَادِيهِمْ فَيَقُولُ أَيْنَ شُرَكَائِيَ الَّذِينَ كُنْتُمْ تَزْعُمُونَ

وَنَزَعْنَا مِنْ كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا فَقُلْنَا هَاتُوا بُرْهَانَكُمْ فَعَلِمُوا أَنَّ الْحَقَّ لِلَّهِ وَضَلَّ عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ

The day He will call out to them and say, 'Where are My partners that you used to claim'? We shall draw from every nation a witness and say, 'Produce your evidence'. Then they will know that all reality belongs to God and what they used to fabricate will forsake them. (28:74 & 75)

When Allah asks people regarding what they did and failed to do, He chooses one of them as a witness and asks him to give an account of a) what they were *expected* to believe and practice, and b) what they *actually* believed and practiced. In this way, the faults of the wrongdoers and those who have gone astray will be exposed. Thus, the role of a witness is that he serves as a standard in this world and hereafter.

A witness confirms those who lie against Allah

On the Day of Judgment, the witnesses will confirm those who denied the signs of Allah and attributed lies to Him:

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ افْتَرَى عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا ۖ أُولَٰئِكَ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ وَيَقُولُ الْأَشْهَادُ هَٰؤُلَاءِ الَّذِينَ كَذَبُوا عَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ ۚ أَلَا لَعْنَةُ اللَّهِ عَلَى الظَّالِمِينَ

Who doth more wrong than those who invent a lie against God. They will be turned back to the presence of their Lord, and the witnesses will say, "These are the ones who lied against their Lord! Behold! the Curse of God is on those who do wrong! (11:18)

Allah says that on the Day of Judgement for both those who have denied divine communications and told lies the witnesses will report the lies they attributed to their Lord.

A witness protects the Divine Book

Another task of witnesses is to protect the Divine Books:

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَا التَّوْرَةَ فِيهَا هُدًى وَنُورٌ ۖ يَحْكُمُ بِهَا النَّبِيُّونَ الَّذِينَ أَسْلَمُوا لِلَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالرَّبَّانِيُّونَ وَالْأَحْبَارُ بِمَا اسْتُحْفِظُوا مِنْ كِتَابِ اللَّهِ وَكَانُوا عَلَيْهِ شُهَدَاءَ ۚ فَلَا تَخْشَوُا النَّاسَ وَاخْشَوْنِي وَلَا تَشْتَرُوا بِآيَاتِي ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا ۚ وَمَنْ لَمْ يَحْكَمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْكَافِرُونَ

We sent down the Torah containing guidance and light. The prophets, who had submitted, judged by it for the Jews, and so did the rabbis and the scribes, as they were charged to preserve the Book of God and were witnesses to it. So do not fear the people, but fear Me, and do not sell My signs for a paltry gain. Those who do not judge by what God has sent down—it is they who are the faithless. (5:44)

The Prophets who have submitted themselves to Allah ruled or judged the Jews according to the Torah.

Afterwards, Allah speaks of the people who were given the task of preserving the Torah – ***“to them was entrusted the protection of God's book and they were witnesses thereto.”*** These people were witnesses upon the Torah: If the Torah was distorted, they will testify on the Day of Judgment as to whether they dutifully maintained the book, or deliberately destroyed it.

Note: Some non-Shi'a scholars assert that the Prophet (s) was the witness against people of his time and all the future generations until end of this world. However, it can be understood from the Qur'an itself that a witness, in this particular sense, must live with and amongst the people whom he is going to be witness against. According to the Qur'an, when God asks Prophet Jesus (a) whether he told the people to take him and his mother for gods besides God, his answer will be:

مَا قُلْتُ لَهُمْ إِلَّا مَا أَمَرْتَنِي بِهِ أَنْ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ رَبِّي وَرَبَّكُمْ ۖ وَكُنْتُ عَلَيْهِمْ شَهِيدًا مَّا دُمْتُ فِيهِمْ ۚ فَلَمَّا تَوَفَّيْتَنِي كُنْتُ أَنتَ الرَّقِيبَ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَأَنْتَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ

I did not say to them [anything] except what You had commanded me [to say] “Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.” And I was a witness to them so long as I was among them. But when You had taken me away. You Yourself were watchful over them, and You are witness to all things. (5:117)

Although Jesus (a) did not die, his position as a witness continued only as long as he lived among the people and ended when God raised him and took him away. Thus, there is no way to hold that the Prophet (s) was a witness in this sense for the period after his demise. There must have been a witness after him, and that witness must be followed by another witness; and this continues until end of this world.

Part 2: Imam Ali as a Witness of God

There are at least two verses (11:17 & 13:43) that clearly indicate that Imam Ali was the witness after the Prophet (s). In what follows, these verses will be examined.

Imam Ali was a witness from the Prophet ('minhu')

The Qur'an says:

أَفَمَنْ كَانَ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِنْ رَبِّهِ وَيَتْلُوهُ شَاهِدٌ مِنْهُ وَمِنْ قَبْلِهِ كِتَابُ مُوسَىٰ إِمَامًا وَرَحْمَةً ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ ۚ وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِهِ مِنَ الْأَحْزَابِ فَالنَّارُ مَوْعِدُهُ ۚ فَلَا تَكُ فِي مِرْيَةٍ مِنْهُ ۚ إِنَّهُ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكَ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

Can they be (like) those who accept a Clear (Sign) from their Lord, and whom a witness from Himself doth teach, as did the Book of Moses before it, – a guide and a mercy? They believe

therein; but those of the Sects that reject it, – the Fire will be their promised meeting-place. Be not then in doubt thereon: for it is the truth from thy Lord: yet many among men do not believe! (11:17)

The sentence “***Can they be (like) those who accept a Clear (Sign) from their Lord***” clearly refers to the Prophet since he who possesses a manifest proof from His Lord. The line “***...and whom a witness from Himself doth teach***” must then refer to someone who is a witness from the Prophet, although he is not the Prophet himself given the word *minhu* (from himself).¹ Indeed, he comes after (yatlu) the Prophet. This person is none other than Imam Ali. The verse of *Mubahala* and the chapter *The Immunity* (*Bara'a*) attest that Imam Ali was he who was *from* the Prophet (*minhu*).

The Event of Mubahala

The Event of Mubahala occurred between the Christians of Najran and Prophet Muhammad on the 10th of Hijrah. When the people of Najran deified Jesus, the Prophet called for a *Mubahalah* – a meeting in which both sides gather their men, women, and children to pray to God and invoke a curse on those who lie:

فَمَنْ حَاجَّكَ فِيهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ فَقُلْ تَعَالَوْا نَدْعُ أَبْنَاءَنَا وَأَبْنَاءَكُمْ وَنِسَاءَنَا وَنِسَاءَكُمْ وَأَنْفُسَنَا وَأَنْفُسَكُمْ ثُمَّ نَبْتَهِلْ فَنَجْعَلْ لَعْنَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَى الْكَاذِبِينَ

If any one disputes in this matter with thee, now after (full) knowledge hath come to thee, say: 'Come! let us gather together, – our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves: Then let us earnestly pray, and invoke the curse of God on those who lie!' (3:61)

The Prophet took Imam Hasan and Husayn as “*our sons*,” Lady Fatima as “*our women*,” and Imam Ali as “*ourselves*.” Imam Ali clearly does not fit into the category of “*our sons*” and “*our women*” which means he must have been from “*ourselves*.” Furthermore, no one can claim to be closer to the Prophet than Imam Ali, and he was the sole person qualified enough to represent the Prophet. Sunni scholars likewise agree that those whom the Prophet summoned are none other than Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn.²

Declaration of the Chapter Bara'a

The Prophet was ordered to reveal the chapter *Bara'a* (*The Immunity*) in condemnation to the unbelievers and polytheists. This involved prohibiting them from entering Masjid ul-Haram³ and asserting that a person cannot enter heaven without being a believer. Additionally, those who entered were no longer permitted to circumambulate the Ka'ba unclothed as this was one of their previous customs.

The Prophet first asked Abu Bakr to deliver it to the people of Mecca. When Abu Bakr set out, he left for

a short time until the Prophet instructed Imam Ali to reach Abu Bakr and ask him to return and to deliver the message himself. The difficulty of being asked to turn back brought Abu Bakr to tears as he supposed that perhaps Allah has revealed something against him personally and thus ordered the Prophet to send him back. The Prophet informed him that there was nothing about him personally, telling him that it was due to a special command of Allah that no one should communicate this to the people except him or a man from him.⁴

The event of *Mubahala* and the revelation of the chapter *Bara'a* verify that the caliphs were not regarded as *from* the Prophet (*minhu*) apart from Imam Ali. Thus, when Allah says, “**a witness from himself follows him**” in verse 11:17, this can only refer to Imam Ali.

Imam Ali was the witness who followed the Prophet and had knowledge of the Book

The following verse also confirms Imam Ali (a) as the witness after Prophet Muhammad:

وَيَقُولُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَسْتَ مُرْسَلًا ۖ قُلْ كَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ شَهِيدًا بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكُمْ وَمَنْ عِنْدَهُ عِلْمُ الْكِتَابِ

The Unbelievers say: "No messenger art thou" Say: "Enough for a witness between me and you is God, and such as have knowledge of the Book." (13:43)

This verse clearly indicates that in addition to God, there was a witness between Prophet Muhammad and the unbelievers who is introduced as the one who had knowledge of the Book. This question becomes extremely important if we reflect on the fact that there is a great difference between having knowledge of the Book (*'ilmul-kitab*) and *some* knowledge of the Book (*'ilmun minal-kitab*). According to the Qur'an, having some knowledge of the Book enabled Asif ibn Barkhiya to bring the throne of the Queen of Saba' to Prophet Solomon (a) in a twinkling of an eye:

قَالَ الَّذِي عِنْدَهُ عِلْمٌ مِّنَ الْكِتَابِ أَنَا آتِيكَ بِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ يَرْتَدَّ إِلَيْكَ طَرْفُكَ ۚ فَلَمَّا رآه مُسْتَقَرًّا عِنْدَهُ قَالَ هَذَا مِنْ فَضْلِ رَبِّي لِيَبْلُوَنِي أَأَشْكُرُ أَمْ أَكْفُرُ ۚ وَمَنْ شَكَرَ فَإِنَّمَا يَشْكُرُ لِنَفْسِهِ ۚ وَمَنْ كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ رَبِّي غَنِيٌّ كَرِيمٌ

The one who had knowledge of the Book said, 'I will bring it to you in the twinkling of an eye.' So when he saw it set near him, he said, 'This is by the grace of my Lord, to test me if I will give thanks or be ungrateful. And whoever gives thanks, gives thanks only for his own sake. (27:40)

If this is what a person who has some knowledge of the Book can do, one can only imagine the ability of a person who has all the knowledge of the Book. Who was the one who had knowledge of the Book other than God and the Prophet and was therefore qualified to be a witness between the Prophet and the people of his time?

Apart from the Prophet, Imam Ali undoubtedly outshined everyone in his wisdom, knowledge, and intelligence. The Prophet said, “The most knowledgeable person in my nation after me is Ali.”⁵ The Prophet lay emphasis on heeding to Imam Ali given his sophistication and intellect. He said, “I am the City of Knowledge and Ali is its gate. Whoever wants to enter this city must first pass through its gate.”⁶ Indeed, Imam Ali is a role model for those who possess an ardent desire to live and die like the Prophet, and eventually dwell in Paradise:

Whoever becomes glad and happy with a life like my life and with a death like my death and with dwelling in the everlasting paradise of my Lord, loves Ali and considers him as his guardian (*wali*), loves the lover of Ali, and follows my household after me, because they are my progeny, they have been created from my clay, and they have been given my knowledge and understanding. Grievous is the one from my nation who denies their merits, and cut the relation between me and them. May God not grant them my intercession.⁷

Given his knowledge and perceptiveness, Imam Ali upholds the mission of protecting the Book. Moreover, his governance is precisely based on the Qur’an, rendering him the sole person to be taken as a standard in understanding Islam and its obligations.

Thus, the one to be taken as a standard in a) understanding Islam, b) understanding what to do, c) upholding the actual task of protecting the Book, and d) judge and rule according to the Book after the Prophet (s) is Imam Ali.

Conclusion

The most outstanding groups of people as said in the Qur’an are the prophets, the truthful, the righteous, and the witnesses. On the Day of Judgment, a witness from each nation who lived with his people and revealed the straight path will testify that the divine message was clearly conveyed to all people, thus eliminating any room for excuses. They verify those who denied the signs of God and attributed lies to Him. They also bear the task of protecting the Divine Book. The Prophet Muhammad (s) was a witness for the people who lived during his time, both for those who believed and rejected his message. Another type of witness is our intellect (*‘aql*).

Several verses of the Qur’an indicate that after the Prophet’s death, Imam Ali bore the responsibility of being a witness amongst his people. In the chapter *Hud*, verse 17, the line “**...and whom a witness from Himself doth teach**” refers to a witness from the Prophet (*minhu*). The verse of *Mubahala*, the chapter *Bara’a*, and the chapter *The Ra’d* attest that this witness – who followed the Prophet and had knowledge of the Book – was none other than Imam Ali.

^{1.} The word *minhu* (from him) has also been used in the Prophet’s hadith regarding Imam Husayn: “Husayn is from me and I am from Husayn.”

^{2.} Sahih Muslim: The Book of Merits in “The Merits of Imam Ali”; Sunan of Tirmidhi no. 3085

^{3.} The Grand Mosque that surrounds the Ka’ba in Mecca.

4. Musnad of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal; Sunan of Tirmidhi; Mustadrak of Saheehayn. Original texts in Arabic are as follows:
إن النبي بعثه ببراءة إلى أهل مكة فسار ثلاثا ثم قال لعلي: ورد علي الحق أبا بكر وبلغها أنت ، قال : فلما قدم أبو بكر على رسول الله بكى ، وقال : يا رسول الله حدث في شيء ، قال : ما حدث فيك إلا خير ، ولكن أمرت أن لا يبلغه إلا أنا أو رجل مني
Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Musnad (Beirut: Dar Sadir), vol. 1, p. 3. See also Sahih of Tirmidhi, vol. 5, p. 594.
روي أن أبا بكر لما كان ببعض الطريق – أي لتبليغ سورة براءة – هبط جبرائيل (عليه السلام) فقال "يا محمد لا يبلغن رسالتك إلا رجلا منك فأرسل عليا..."

Zamakhshari, Jarullah, Al-Kashshaf (Beirut: 1987, Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi), vol. 2, p. 243.

5. Manaqib al-Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib of Ibn al-Maghazeli al-Shafi'i

6. Sahih al-Tirmidhi, v5, pgs. 201, 637; al-Mustadrak by al-Hakim, v3, pgs. 126–127, 226; Fada'il al-Sahaba by Ahmad ibn Hanbal, v2, p. 635, tradition # 1081 [as seen in A Shi'ite Encyclopedia]; Mustadrak ul Sahihayn vol. 3 p. 163.

7. Kanzul Ummal, vol. 6, p. 155; Mustadrak by al-Hakim, vol. 3, p. 128; Kanz al-'Ummal, vol. 6, p. 155; Al-Manaqib by Khawarazmi, p. 34; Yanabi' al-Mawaddah, p. 149; Tarikh by Ibn 'Asakir, vol. 2, p. 95; Hilyat al-Awliya, vol. 1, p. 86; Al-Jami' al-Kabir by al Tabrani and Al-Isabah by Ibn Hajar. The original text in Arabic is as follows:

من سره أن يحيا حياتي ويموت مماتي ويسكن جنة عدن غرسها ربي فليوال عليا من بعدي وليوال من وليه ، وليقتد بالأئمة من بعدي فإنهم عترتي خلقوا من طينتي رزقوا فهما وعلما ، وويل للمكذبين بفضله من أمتي للقاطعين فيهم صلتي لا أنالهم الله شفاعتي

It should be noted that unfortunately some Sunni writers have tried to question the authenticity of this hadith. For example, Ibn Hajar in his Al-Isabah questions the chain of narration for this hadith because of weakness of Yahya ibn 'Ya'la while both Muslim and Bukhari have trusted him and narrated hadiths from him. People like Dhahabi have also taken his trustworthiness out of question.

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<https://www.al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol-13-no-4-winter-2013/imamate-and-wilayah-part-5-mohammad-ali-shomali#comment-0>

Links

- [1] <https://www.al-islam.org/person/mohammad-ali-shomali>
- [2] <https://www.al-islam.org/organization/ahlul-bayt-world-assembly>
- [3] <https://www.al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/43052>
- [4] <https://www.al-islam.org/printepub/book/export/html/43052>
- [5] <https://www.al-islam.org/printmobi/book/export/html/43052>
- [6] <https://www.al-islam.org/tags/wilayah>
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