

# IMĀMAH REFLECTS DIVINE AUTHORITY

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It is not unusual for researchers to confound the concept of *Imāmah* with that of *Khilāfah* for many assume that mundane authority is a core concept. However, this paper will attempt to extricate the root of the word and to verify its Qur'ānic usage so as to shed light on the vast difference that exists between *Imāmah* and *Khilāfah*. Examination of the essential characteristics required — if the entitlement and honor of the status of *Imāmah* is to be granted — appear to be surrounded by specific divine responsibilities that are in line with the concept of guidance, which within Shi'ī theology, is the main reason behind the appointment of Messengers and Prophets.

KEYWORDS: *Imāmah*, *Khilāfah*, guidance, *Malakūt*, Ibrāhīm, Divine Authority, *Iṣṭifā'*.

## INTRODUCTION

The term *Imāmah* and its derivatives are mentioned in the following Qur'ānic references:

1. After many trials and tribulations, the Prophet Ibrāhīm (AS) was granted the privilege of Allah Almighty stating, “I am appointing you Imam for humankind (2:124).”

Some exegetes have interpreted this *āyah* to be an expression of Ibrāhīm being appointed to the prophethood — in other words, the term *Imam* is the equivalent of ‘prophet’.

Accurate analysis leads to exposure of the weakness of the above argument because the position of *Imāmah* was only granted to Ibrāhīm in his old age after he had already been appointed a prophet and had already fathered both Iṣḥāq and Ismā'īl. The above *āyah* follows on from Ibrāhīm seeking clarification from his Lord as to whether his progeny are to be honored with the same privilege — to which Allah Almighty responded, ‘My covenant does not extend to those who are not just.’

Other exegetes have attempted to interpret the use of the word *Imāmah* in the above *āyah* as an indication of the binding nature of a person's commands. This too is clearly fallacious, as telling a person — already informed of his being appointed prophet — that they are to be privileged by another grant of their commands being binding makes no sense whatsoever.

2. In the Qur'ān fourteen characteristics of ‘Allah's good servants’ are identified in the guidelines for the righteous. Towards the end of these they request Allah Almighty, “Make

us *Imams* for those who are pious” (25:74). Many exegetes, such as Abul A‘la Maududi (2007) have translated the word *Imam* to mean ‘The leader’.

Scrupulous research within the corpus of Qur’ānic technical terminology leads us to conclude that the concept of *Imāmah* is combined with the concept of guidance. For example, Allah Almighty, after informing us of the challenges that many prophets and messengers faced, including Ibrāhīm (AS) tells us, “We made them *Imams* to guide by Our command and We have revealed to them the performance of good deeds, the maintenance of prayers and the giving of *zakāh*.” The same sequence of words between *Imāmah* and guidance is used in relation to Imams, “Who remained patient and had attained certainty vis-à-vis Our signs” (32:24).

Why is guidance restricted to being – ‘by Allah’s command’?

Allah’s command, in the context of both of the above quoted *āyāt*, denotes Divine Sovereignty (*Malakūt*). This technical term is incorporated in Allah’s statement, “When He wills something, it is via His command that He orders it ‘Be’, and then it immediately is. Glorified is He in whose hands lies the *Malakūt* of all things to whom you shall be brought back” (36:82-83).

From the above analysis we conclude that the *Imāmah* is summarized in guidance and that that guidance is materialized via Allah’s command – and because that is specified as being His divine sovereignty – it is not possible for the position of *Imāmah* to be restricted to or by anything that is mundane.<sup>1</sup>

‘Allāmah al-Ḥillī (1928, p. 62) defines *Imāmah* as, “Universal authority in all matters that relate to religion and the world, that a person who is appointed to be a deputy/successor to the Prophet is entitled to hold.” Many other *Imāmī* theologians have elaborated on this definition to highlight the combination of both divine and mundane authority.

## IMĀMAH IS A DIVINE COVENANT

We observe that when the Prophet Ibrāhīm (AS) asked Allah if his progeny would also be entitled to the position of *Imāmah*, Allah responded, “My covenant does not embrace those who are unjust” (2:124). This unequivocally confirms the position of *Imāmah* to be a divine covenant that is not in any way associated with political leadership.

According to the Qur’ān (33:72) humanity has taken upon itself, ‘The Trust’ (*Amānah*) that Allah Almighty had previously offered to the heavens, the earth and the mountains. However, all of those feared and thus declined to accept it, while human beings readily took it upon themselves and have subsequently shown themselves to be both unjust and ignorant.

In his *Tafsīr*, al-Ṭabarī provides many interpretations for the word *Amānah* – Trust. He said that Adam was offered this onerous responsibility but as he felt that he would not be able to bear it, he was not permitted to remain in paradise for a span of time greater than between afternoon and sunset – after which period he was expelled. Al-Ṭabarī (1987, vol. 22, pp. 38-41) then said, “The most appropriate interpretation is that *Amānah* refers to all types of trust that weigh heavily upon the shoulders of people.”

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1998, vol. 5, p. 576) interpreted the word *Amānah* as being a reference to *taklīf*, i.e., being held responsible to undertake religious duties. In a similar fashion to al-Ṭabarī, he narrated a variety of possible interpretations of this concept, but after rejecting most of them, he concluded by saying, “Allah knows best.”

Al-Ṭūsī (1409/1988, vol. 6, p. 367) defined *Amānah* as referring to the fulfilment of any commitment that is undertaken by those who are trustworthy. He then quotes Ibn ‘Abbās in interpreting the above as submission to Allah Almighty.

‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī (1983, vol. 16, p. 349) concluded that the most appropriate meaning of the word *Amānah* is Divine Sovereignty.

The trust mentioned in this *āyah* refers to the responsibilities that rest upon the shoulders of humankind – responsibilities to be neglected by them as the result of their defective characteristics: of being unjust and of being ignorant. But those who are equipped with contrasting attributes, i.e., the knowledgeable and the just, are entitled and honored to take on this significant burden.

It is reasonable to conclude that the abovementioned trust is the right of Divine Sovereignty and Leadership of the Muslim Community. The other side of the coin is referred to as *wilāyah*. It is clear that only one who has been divinely appointed and endowed with knowledge and justice of conduct is eligible and entitled to wield authority over the Muslim nation. When Imam al-Ṣādiq (AS) was asked to clarify the passage in the Qur’ān that mentions the ‘Trust’ granted by Allah Almighty to humankind, he responded, “That trust is nothing other than the *wilāyah* of the Commander of the Faithful (AS).”<sup>2</sup>

## WHAT IS WILĀYAH?

Hans Wehr (1980, s.v. *w-l-y*) defines *wilāyah* as “sovereign power, sovereignty, rule and government.” However, he defines *walā’* as “friendship, benevolence, goodwill, devotion and loyalty.”

An investigation of Arabic lexicons yields 22 different meanings for the word *wilāyah* and those characterized as being a *walī*. All languages have homonyms – words having the same written or spoken form but differing in meanings or origins – for which the only means to determine the applicability depends upon their context and usage. When we first examine meanings applicable to *wilāyah* and *walī* and then search in the Qur’ān for the various contexts in which these are used, we find ‘owner; master; friend; companion; protector; helper; guardian; one who holds authority’ with the closest meanings included in Arabic lexicons.

However, when we trace the word *walī* in the Qur’ān, we find that Allah Almighty describes himself as the ‘Ultimate *Walī*’. No meaning provided for *walī* in the lexicons may thus be applied to Allah Almighty other than that of His holding Ultimate Authority over all creatures and universes. For example, we read in the Qur’ān (2:257), “Allah is the *Walī* who brings believers out of darkness into light.” However, in some other contexts, the word *walī* is used in the sense of guardianship, e.g., “My guardian is indeed Allah who sent down the Book and He takes care of those who are righteous” (7:196). It is clear from the above *āyah*

that the guardianship specified in Islamic Law for those in charge of minors' affairs is not intended here, but it applies rather to 'the One who holds overall authority'.

In Islamic theology, Allah is the ultimate source of knowledge, power, wisdom and all the other divine attributes. However, He himself grants whatever authority He wills to whomever He wills. For example, while He tells us that He is The Creator, He informs us that He authorized the Prophet 'Īsā (AS) to create a bird from molded clay by blowing into its form (5:110). He has also described Himself as bringing about death and receiving the souls of the deceased, but that He has authorized the Angel of Death to perform that task (32:11). In the same manner, while Allah Almighty describes Himself as being the Ultimate *Walī*, He unequivocally informs us that supreme sovereignty has been granted by Him to His final messenger and to the believer who gave charity while in *rukū'* (5:55). It is noteworthy that the *āyah* referring to this concept begins with the preventive particle *innamā* that all scholars of Arabic grammar accept as expressing exclusivity. Thus, according to this *āyah*, Ultimate Authority is held by Allah Almighty – with full authority over the Muslim nation applying only to those who were mentioned after Allah.

In another Qur'ānic reference (33:6), the authority granted by Allah to His final messenger is asserted as his holding entitlement to make decisions that overrule any decisions that believers make for themselves, "The prophet has greater authority over believers that they themselves have over their own affairs." The Arabic term used here is '*awlā'* – the superlative adjective for *walī*.

In addressing the Muslims who had joined him near the Pond (*Ghadīr*) of Khumm during the Farewell Pilgrimage (*Hajjat al-Widā'*), the Prophet (SAW) began by asking, "Am I not entitled to overrule decisions you make regarding your own affairs?" To which they unanimously agreed that he was. In asking this he used the same term, *awlā'*. According to authentic reports he immediately thereafter raised the hand of Imam 'Alī (AS) and said, "For those for whom I am *Mawlā'*, 'Alī too is *Mawlā'*."<sup>3</sup>

When the Prophet (SAW) had finished the following, the *āyah* (5:3) was revealed, "I have today perfected your religion, granted you my bounties and approved Islam to be your faith."

In a comprehensive 11 volume work covering every aspect of the above event presented over 14 centuries of Islamic history, 'Allāmah Amīnī records all the chains of narration and quotes every Arab poet whose work cites any aspect that occurred at Ghadīr Khumm at that time. In his book, '*Abaqāt al-Anwār*, Laknawī quotes dozens of Sunni books that report details of such events via examination of their reliability.

## WILĀYAH, THE FOUNDATION OF ALL ACTS OF DEVOTION

In many *aḥādīth* the Infallible Imams have emphasized the significance of *wilāyah* as the foundation for all acts of worship that Islam has ordained to strengthen the bonds between believers and their Lord. Some instances of those *aḥādīth* follow.

1. Kulaynī, via an authentic chain of narrators, reports Imam al-Bāqir (AS) as saying, "Islam is established on five pillars: *ṣalāh*, *zakāh*, *ḥajj*, *ṣawm* and *wilāyah*." Zurārah asked the

Imam about the most significant of the pillars and the Imam replied, “It is *wilāyah* because it is the key to all the others.”<sup>5</sup>

2. In another chain of narration, Kulaynī reports that Imam al-Bāqir (AS) said, “Islam is established on five pillars: *ṣalāh*, *zakāh*, *ḥajj*, *ṣawm* and *wilāyah*, the most prominent of which is *wilāyah*.”<sup>6</sup>

3. Shaykh Ṣadūq (Ibn Bābawayh) narrates from Imam al-Ḥasan (AS) as saying, “Allah Almighty did not command you to offer obligatory duties because He is in need of them, rather because they are blessings for you . . . He made it obligatory upon you to offer pilgrimage, ‘*umrah*,<sup>7</sup> your daily prayers, payment of your charitable dues, fasting and to remain loyal to *wilāyah*.”<sup>8</sup>

4. ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn, also known as al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, reports through his chain of narrators that having confirmed that that Islam had been established on five pillars, Imam ‘Alī (AS) said, “*Wilāyah* is the seal that guarantees and secures all of the acts of devotion presented via their use.”<sup>9</sup>

From the above we conclude that *wilāyah*, the other side of the coin referred to as *Imāmah*, plays an essential role in the faith. And, as we observe in the event of *Ghadīr*, it conveys to Muslims the significance of their faith having been perfected and Allah Almighty having pronounced it to have been completed.

To shed further light on this subject we quote Imam Riḍā’s (AS) clarification of the significance of remaining loyal to *Imāmah*. He said, “*Imāmah* is the bridle rein that controls the power of religion (*zimām*), the foundation of Islam and the standard of compliance of the Muslim nation. Via *Imāmah* the dignity of believers is guaranteed and the realization of each act of devotion is attained.”<sup>10</sup>

## A DEBATE BETWEEN ḤISHĀM AND A MU‘TAZILITE SCHOLAR

The Mu‘tazilites generally believe that appointing an Imam as successor to the Prophet rests on the shoulders of the people without need for any divine intervention. In this respect they hold the same opinion as the Ash‘arites. For example, ‘Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī (d. 680/1281) said, “*Imāmah* is not a part of the Principles of Religion as the Shi‘ah claim. It is rather an aspect of the obligations that rest upon the shoulders of the people.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 793/1391) said, “There is no argument that the discourse regarding *Imāmah* is more appropriate as an aspect of jurisprudence than that of theology.”<sup>12</sup>

The outstanding Mu‘tazilite scholar, ‘Amr ibn ‘Ubayd, was delivering lectures on the above subject in Basra when a young student of Imam al-Ṣādiq (AS), Ḥishām ibn al-Ḥakam, joined his circle of students to seek clarification from him apropos of the logical necessity of Allah Almighty appointing an Imam over the people choosing one themselves. The young Ḥishām opened the debate by asking,

“Do you have eyes?”

“What a ridiculous question to ask. However, as Ḥishām repeated his question, ‘Amr ibn ‘Ubayd, had little option but to agree that he had eyes.

“What do you do with your eyes?”



“I use them for visual perception.”  
 “Have you got ears?”  
 “Indeed, I do.”  
 “And what do you do with your ears?”  
 “I use them for aural perception.”  
 “Have you got a nose?”  
 “As you can see, I do.”  
 “And what do you do with your nose?”  
 “I use it for olfactory perception.”

Hishām continued to question the function of every organ and limb and the teacher continued to respond until Hishām asked,

“What do you do when any of the aforementioned limbs and organs err?”  
 “My insight is a gift from Allah to control and amend any errors that my organs may make.”  
 “Do you believe that in His wisdom Allah Almighty ordained that we be equipped with insight to amend our physical errors but did not appoint a human being to amend informative errors that circulate within the body politic of the Muslim nation?!”  
 “Where are you from?” When Hishām replied that he was from Kufa, ‘Amr ibn ‘Ubayd said, “I presume you have learned all of this from Jā‘far al-Ṣādiq.”<sup>13</sup>

This celebrated debate clarifies the Imāmī theological doctrine of Allah’s wisdom, and as The Source of Guidance, it necessitates the divine appointment of an Imam as successor to the Prophet to maintain overall charge of the religious and the mundane. This is why Kulynī devoted a whole chapter to the above subject in his *Uṣūl al-Kāfī*, entitled *Bāb al-Iḍṭirār ilā al-Ḥujjah*, in which he reports many aḥādith from the Infallible Imams to the effect that, had the universe been deprived of *al-Ḥujjah* – the one who represents and reflects divine authority – for even one second, it would without doubt have collapsed.<sup>14</sup>

## DIVINE SELECTION – *IṢṬIFĀ’*

In order to analyze the doctrine of the schools of theology that do not regard *Imāmah* to be a principle of the Islamic of Faith, we need to remain mindful of the Qur’ānic technical term that renders Divine Selection, i.e., *iṣṭifā’*, an essential criterion for Prophethood, and those who are entitled to guide humankind.

In the Arabic language, *iṣṭifā’* has two different connotations:

1. The acquirement of pristine pure undiluted particles of a substance, for example, in distilling water to enable the extraction of the essence of a substance, for which the Arabic language utilizes the word *ṣafwah*, the root of *Iṣṭifā’*.
2. To be singled out from a wider group to be an exemplar, specifically those who have unequivocally surrendered themselves to Allah’s commands.

Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī (1983, vol. 3, p. 164) turns to the Qur'ān (3:42) for corroboration that the word *Iṣṭifā'* is used in connection with the above two different meanings. In addressing Maryam (SA) the Angels said, "O Maryam, Allah has purified you and has chosen you over all the women in the world" (3:42). The word *Iṣṭifā'* is employed twice in this *āyah* to distinguish between the two connotations, since it would not be logical to repeat the same title in addressing a person.

*Iṣṭifā'* is employed in the Qur'ān (3:33) to acknowledge the position of Adam, Nūḥ, the family of Ibrāhīm and the family of 'Imrān. And, as seen earlier, it is also used to acknowledge the position of Maryam. When the Children of Isrā'īl requested the Prophet of their time to appoint a king to lead their troops in battle, their Prophet told them that Allah Almighty had chosen Ṭālūt to reign as their king. However, they argued asking, "How can he possibly hold authority over us when he is impecunious and has not been granted riches?!" Their Prophet answered, "Allah selected him over you and granted him profound knowledge and strength" (2:246-248). In the above context, the word *Iṣṭifā'* denotes selection.

The term *Iṣṭifā'* is also employed in the Qur'ān (7:144) in relation to the Prophet Mūsā (AS) when Allah Almighty selected him and granted him preference by appointing him as His Messenger to humankind.

To conclude, a profound examination and a clear analysis regarding those mentioned in the Qur'ān as having been divinely selected lead us to the fact that leadership, as a specific theological concept, leaves no opportunity for humankind to elect their own political favorites! Interestingly, Imam al-Riḍā (AS) challenged many scholars of his time regarding this issue.

## DEBATE OVER THE WORD *IṢṬIFĀ'* BETWEEN IMAM RIḌĀ AND SCHOLARS OF HIS TIME

It has been reported that during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mūn, he invited scholars from Iraq and Khurasan to debate with Imam al-Riḍā (AS) about the meaning of Allah's words, "We made those servants whom We selected heirs of the Book..." (35:32).

Addressing the audience, al-Ma'mūn asked, "Who is referred to in the above *āyah* as having been selected?" The scholars responded, "Allah means the whole [Muslim] nation." Al-Ma'mūn then asked Imam al-Riḍā (AS), "What is your opinion regarding this?" The Imam said, "I do not agree with that opinion because Allah Almighty was referring to the purified progeny of the Prophet (SAW)."

Al-Ma'mūn then asked, "In what way does the *āyah* refer to the Prophet's progeny rather than to the whole nation?"

The Imam replied, "Had He meant the nation of Islam, the whole of the Muslim nation would be admitted to paradise, but this *āyah* continues, 'Some are unjust, others are moderate, while yet others compete with each other in offering good deeds' (35:32). This signifies that selection, with regard to being Guardians of the Book, is specifically intended for the purified progeny of the Prophet (SAW), about whom He Almighty has said, 'Allah wills to remove all kinds of impurity from you, the household [of the Prophet] so as to purify you thoroughly' (33:33).' This evidence verifies the accuracy of my conclusion."

The scholars asked him, “Did Allah Almighty elaborate in the Qur’ān on the term *Iṣṭifā’*?” The Imam (AS) then quoted 12 Qur’ānic *āyāt* that verify that He indeed had.<sup>17</sup>

In accordance with Imāmī theology, the quality of ‘infallibility’ (*Iṣmah*) is essential for those who have been vested with divine guidance, i.e., Prophets and Imams. Without their being free from error and sin people would not trust them or their guidance. Without trust people would not listen to or act upon their teachings and that would negate the purpose of their existence. This is why, in that august debate, Imam al-Riḍā (AS) emphasized *Iṣṭifā’* as being the essential requirement exclusively applied to the household of the Prophet whom Allah thoroughly purified.

## MONOTHEISM IS INCOMPLETE WITHOUT FAITH IN IMĀMAH

When al-Ma’mūn summoned Imam al-Riḍā (AS) to join him in Marv to where he was travelling, the Imam arrived in Nishapur where a huge number of scholars requested him to dismount and narrate a *ḥadīth* from which they could increase their knowledge. The Imam then reported from his father, Imam Mūsā ibn Ja‘far (AS), and from his forefathers that Imam ‘Alī (AS) had said, “I heard the Messenger of Allah (SAW) saying that he had heard Jibrā’īl convey a message from Allah in which He said, ‘*Lā ilāha illā Allāh* is My fortress and whoever enters my fortress will be immune from My chastisement.’ The scholars said that as the Imam was about to continue his journey he said to them, ‘Beware of the requirements that are concomitant with that statement for I am embraced within those requirements.’”<sup>18</sup>

The above statement goes hand in hand with what was quoted above under *Wilāyah* as the foundation of all acts of devotion.

## CONCLUSION

Having examined all the theological principles regarding *Imāmah*, we conclude,

1. According to the Qur’ān, *Imāmah* is a divine covenant that does extend to those who are unjust.
2. According to the *ḥadīth* reported on the authority of Imam Ṣādiq (AS), the *Amānah* that had been offered to the heavens, the earth and mountains which was declined by them but accepted by humankind is nothing other than *wilāyah*.
3. *Wilāyah* is the other side of the coin that is *Imāmah*.
4. Monotheism and all acts of devotion are incomplete without *wilāyah*.
5. According to the debate held between Imam al-Riḍā (AS) and many scholars of Iraq and Khurasan in the presence of al-Ma’mūn, the Qur’ānic technical term *Iṣṭifā’* is exclusively applied to the purified progeny of the Prophet (SAW).



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## NOTES

1. Some Muslim scholars such as Muḥammad Salīm al-‘Awwā, in their attempt to define the political system within Islamic States deal only with: Insuring order; defence of borders; observing justice; the protection of rights and all things that guarantee the public’s interest. Such definitions take no account of divine guidance as being the core value of leadership in its theological sense, see al-‘Awwā, 1989, p. 126.
2. Kulaynī, 1983, vol. 2, p. 368.
3. Ayatollah Ja‘far Subḥānī discussed in detail the usage of the Arabic words *mawlā* and *awlā*, quoting many eminent lexicographers, e.g., al-Farrā’ (d. 207/822), al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), al-Akhfash (d. 218/833) in addition to al-Bukhārī in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 7, p. 240.
4. Having quoted al-Jawharī in *Ṣiḥāḥ al-Lughah*, Ibn al-Athīr in *al-Nihāyah*, al-Zabīdī in *Tāj al-‘Arūs* and Fīrūzābādī in *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*, Ayatollah Subḥānī concludes that *mawlā* has a single meaning encompassing all the 21 senses mentioned in Arabic lexicons, see al-‘Āmilī & Subḥānī (1417/1996, vol. 4, pp. 88-94).
5. Kulaynī, 1983, vol. 2, p. 16; al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī, 1427/2006, vol. 1, p. 13.
6. Kulaynī, 1983, vol. 2, p. 15; al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī, 1427/2006, vol. 1, p. 18.
7. A pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) that may be completed at any time of the year (Ed).
8. Ibn Bābawayh, 1408/1988, p. 249; al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī, 1427/2006, vol. 1, p. 21.
9. al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, 1428/2007, p. 77; al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī, 1427/2006, vol. 1, p. 28.
10. Kulaynī, 1983; al-Qummī, 1416/1995, vol. 1, p. 87.
11. al-Ījī, 199? p. 345. This book consists of epistemology, ontological principles, the soul, the intellect and *Imāmah* according to the Ash‘arite School of Theology.
12. al-Taftāzānī, n.d., *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, p. 232. The author, al-Taftāzānī, studied under ‘Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī and compiled a commentary on his teachings.
13. al-Ṭabrisī, 1386/1966, vol. 2, pp. 125-128.
14. al-Ṣaffār, 1426/2005, p. 489.
15. al-Kulaynī, 1983, vol. 1, p. 179.
16. al-Ṣadūq, 1390/1970, vol. 1, p. 201.
17. Ibn Bābawayh, 2005, vol. 1, pp. 207-218; idem, 1980, pp. 615-626. The above dialogue quoted from the above sources is also included in Majlisī, 2008, vol. 25, pp. 220-233.
18. Ibn Bābawayh, 1956, p. 25.