

**Imamology in Twelver-Shī‘ite Islamic Thought**  
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I. Introduction

My lecture tonight will focus on presenting an overview of Imamology in Twelver-Shī‘ite Islamic thought. Due to the constraint of time and the complexity of this doctrine, I will not be presenting other Shī‘ite viewpoints, that is, those of the Zaydīs and Ismā‘īlīs, which form two minority branches within Shī‘ism today.

“Imamology” (*al-imāma*), or the belief in the special nature, status, and authority of the Imam (or the divine guide or leader), forms the bedrock of the Twelver-Shī‘ite worldview. In fact, it may even be argued that Imamology is the most important, yet also the most misunderstood, doctrine within Islam as a whole. The sixth Islamic century (twelfth century CE) scholar al-Shahristānī has noted in his famous heresiographical work *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* (“The Book of Sects and Creeds”), that “the greatest conflict between the *umma* (Muslim community) is the conflict over the imāmate, for there has been no other religious principle in which the sword has been raised more within Islam than concerning the imāmate.”<sup>1</sup>

At the outset, it must be stated that Imamology is a very intricate and complex concept that cannot be fully elucidated in the time that we have tonight. It is therefore necessary that we focus our attention on some of the most important elements of this doctrine. It must also be noted that Imamology is intimately linked to two other important doctrines: Divine Grace (*al-lutf*) and Prophetology (*al-nubuwwa*). As such, I will begin my discussion by first introducing these two doctrines, before proceeding forward with a discussion on Imamology and its attendant doctrines.

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<sup>1</sup> Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahristānī, *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, 1:24.

## II. Divine Grace and Human Responsibility

The Twelver-Shī'ite tradition considers God's creation of the universe and everything within it, including humankind, to be a blessing from God. The famous Twelver-Shī'ite scholar al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī (d. 676/1277) states that the reason for this belief is twofold: first, that the creation of human beings is undoubtedly advantageous to humans (by virtue of their being alive and capable to act), and second, because God's actions are inherently good and cannot be conceived of as being anything but good. Of course, one may object to this by stating that some, if not all, people, experience pain and difficulty in their lives. So, how is it possible that their creation and existence can be beneficial or advantageous? To this, al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī responds that God bestows compensations (*'iwad*) for any difficulties people experience in their lives, so that the difficulties are inundated, or drowned out with compensation, thus, leading ultimately to a benefit.<sup>2</sup> Thus, God's creation of humanity is considered to be a blessing and advantageous for human beings.

God's creation of humans also necessarily entails God's imposition of a charge or task (*al-taklīf*) upon them. In his famous theological work entitled *al-Bāb al-Ḥādī- 'Ashar* ("The Eleventh Chapter"), the celebrated theologian and jurist al-'Allāma al-Ḥillī (d. 726/1325) defines this divine charge or task (*al-taklīf*) upon humans as: "a responsibility toward him to whom obedience is due, in that in which is labor, by way of a beginning, on condition of knowing."<sup>3</sup> In other words, since they have been brought into existence by God, humans are, also, in the first place, responsible before their Creator. This responsibility entails three things: (1) a level of difficulty (*taklīf* comes from *kulfa*, meaning "burden" or "hardship"), (2) it is a primary responsibility (that is to say, all other responsibilities of obedience—such as those toward the Prophet Muḥammad, the Imams, or one's parents—originate from it and are secondary to it), and (3) it is active as long as the one who is tasked with it is aware of the existence and nature of this task (that is to say, one who is unable to know or understand cannot be tasked or held responsible).

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī, *al-Maslak fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, 92-93.

<sup>3</sup> Al-'Allāma al-Ḥillī, *Al-Bāb al-Ḥādī- 'Ashar*, 71.

But, knowing that humans have been charged with responsibilities, the question arises: How are humans to know and fulfill their responsibilities before God in a suitable manner? Here is where the doctrine of God's Grace (*al-lutf*) appears. According to Twelver-Shī'ite thought, Divine Grace necessitates that God directs humans who have been tasked by God to observe certain prescriptions and abstain from other proscriptions toward proper guidance, so that they are capable of recognizing their responsibilities, and then fulfilling them. Thus, we find the prominent medieval Baghdad-based theologian and jurist, al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022), arguing that, "Responsibility (*al-taklīf*) cannot be valid without [the presence of] Messengers...It is [therefore] necessary, with the initial imposition of responsibility [upon humans by God] in the world, that a Messenger exists."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the Messenger's duty is to guide humanity toward fulfilling their responsibilities.

Twelver-Shī'ite tradition holds that there are two forms of guidance: one is internal and the other is external (*bāṭina wa ḡāhira*). The inner form is represented by an innate capacity given by God to every human being, which allows humans to be able to recognize and distinguish between good and evil and right and wrong. This innate capacity is sometimes referred to as the primordial nature (*al-fiṭra*). For example, the Qur'ān states: "[O Muḡammad] set your face toward religion in an upstanding manner, in the primordial nature from God upon which He originated humankind."<sup>5</sup> The Qur'ān further states, "Truly We guided him upon the way, be he grateful or ungrateful"<sup>6</sup> and "Have We not shown him the two ways [of good and evil]?"<sup>7</sup> Thus, every human has been equipped with an internal guide or compass that allows one to recognize one's responsibility toward God. However, sometimes the internal guide may become corrupted or may malfunction. Or, it may require an additional aid in arriving at a more comprehensive understanding of its responsibilities and how exactly to fulfill them. This is why, in addition to inner guidance, humans have also been gifted with an external or manifest guide.

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<sup>4</sup> Al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Awā'il al-Maqālāt*, 44.

<sup>5</sup> Qur'ān, 30:30.

<sup>6</sup> Qur'ān, 76:3.

<sup>7</sup> Qur'ān, 90:10.

### III. Prophetology

The external or manifest guide is represented by divinely-appointed exemplars, that is to say, Prophets and Messengers who have been chosen and inspired by God with divine revelations to guide humankind. Here is where the doctrine of Prophetology (*al-nubuwwa*) comes into play.

Al-‘Allāma al-Ḥillī defines the Prophet (*al-nabī*) as “a human being who brings forth a message from God without the mediation of another human being.”<sup>8</sup> So, first, the Prophet must be a human being and not some other creature. The Qur’ān states: “Say [O Muḥammad]: I am only a human being like you.”<sup>9</sup> Secondly, the Prophet receives divine revelations without the mediation of another human being, that is to say, directly from God through either an angel or a dream or similar means of inspiration. The second part of the verse I just quoted states, “I am only a human being like you, but I receive revelations.”<sup>10</sup> But just how are humans to verify that someone who claims Prophethood is a true Prophet? First, the Prophet must be able to perform miracles (*al-mu‘jiza*), that is, supernatural acts that accompany and confirm his claim to Prophethood. The Qur’ān describes some of the miracles of the Prophets, such as Moses’ transformation of his staff into a serpent<sup>11</sup> and his splitting of the sea,<sup>12</sup> Jesus’ bringing the dead back to life and healing of the sick,<sup>13</sup> and Muḥammad’s bringing forth the inimitable Qur’ān.<sup>14</sup> These miracles served as proof for the Prophets’ claims of Prophethood and divine inspiration. Second, the Prophet must be immune from all sin and absolutely error-free (*ma‘ṣūm*). Al-‘Allāma al-Ḥillī defines inerrancy as a hidden form of Divine Grace (*lutf*) bestowed upon the Prophet by God that gives the Prophet no incentive to forsake obedience and to commit sin, despite his having the power to do so.<sup>15</sup> (This is why “inerrancy” is a better translation than “infallibility”) His reasoning for the existence and necessity of the doctrine of inerrancy is that, without it, there can be no way to ensure the complete veracity of the Prophet’s message. In other words, if the Prophet disobeys God or commits errors, his followers cannot be led to the

<sup>8</sup> Al-‘Allāma al-Ḥillī, *Al-Bāb al-Ḥādī-‘Ashar*, 81.

<sup>9</sup> Qur’ān, 18:110.

<sup>10</sup> Qur’ān, 18:110.

<sup>11</sup> Qur’ān, 7:107.

<sup>12</sup> Qur’ān, 20:77

<sup>13</sup> Qur’ān, 3:49.

<sup>14</sup> Qur’ān, 10:38.

<sup>15</sup> Al-‘Allāma al-Ḥillī, *Al-Bāb al-Ḥādī-‘Ashar*, 89.

truth. This would defeat the purpose of sending the Prophet in the first place, which is to guide humans to the truth.

According to Twelver-Shī'ite thought, the inerrancy of the Prophet must be absolute, that is to say, it must extend from the beginning of the Prophet's life to its end. It must also include abstinence from both major and minor sins, as well as all types of errors, including misjudgments and forgetfulness. Furthermore, the Prophet must be the best (*al-afḍal*) among the people of his time. He must be superior to everyone else in his knowledge and in all other virtues. This is because the one who is inferior cannot have precedence over the one who is superior. In support of this notion, al-'Allāma al-Ḥillī employs the Qur'ānic verse that states, "Is the one who guides to the truth worthier to be followed, or the one who himself cannot find guidance unless he is guided by others?"<sup>16</sup> Finally, the Prophet must not possess any defects, neither in his moral character, nor his physical capabilities. This is all because, according to Twelver-Shī'ite thought, the Prophet's followers must be inclined to follow him, and his possession of defects would deter them from being absolutely inclined to listen to and obey him. After this long excursion into the doctrines of Divine Grace and Prophetology, we are now ready to discuss Imamology.

#### IV. Imamology

Al-'Allāma al-Ḥillī defines the Imāmate as a universal authority over both religious and worldly affairs.<sup>17</sup> Before him, al-Shaykh al-Mufīd introduced the Imam as the one who "takes the place of the prophets in enforcing judgments, seeing to the execution of legal penalties, safeguarding the law, and educating humankind." This position of the place and authority of the Imam is derived from Prophetology and is necessitated by Divine Grace.

As for its derivation from Prophetology, this is because the Imam is considered to be the successor of the Prophet and his task is to elucidate the Prophetic message and ensure its protection and continuance after the demise of the Prophet. As successor to the Prophet, his function as the political and religious leader of the community is virtually the same as that of the Prophet. Thus, we find that al-Shaykh al-Mufīd states that, "Imāmīs [Twelver-Shī'ites] are in agreement that every Messenger (*rasūl*) is a Prophet (*nabī*), but not every Prophet is a

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<sup>16</sup> Qur'ān, 10:35.

<sup>17</sup> Al-'Allāma al-Ḥillī, *Al-Bāb al-Ḥādī- 'Ashar*, 93.

Messenger, and that some of God's Prophets were the guardians and protectors of the messages of earlier Messengers. Furthermore, it is revelation (*al-shar'*) that prohibits the Imams from being considered Prophets, not reason (*al-'aql*); this is due to the Imams' having possessed the responsibilities of the Prophets."<sup>18</sup> In other words, if it wasn't for the revelatory affirmation of the finality of divine revelation with the Prophet Muḥammad and the negation of any Prophet or Messenger after him (for example, Qur'ānic statement: "Muḥammad is not the father of any of your males. Rather, he is the Messenger of God and the Seal of the Prophets"<sup>19</sup>), there would be no rational prohibition for the Imams to have been considered Prophets. Thus, Imamology is derived from Prophetology.

The Imāmate is necessitated by Divine Grace because, just as God's Grace entails sending Prophets and Messengers as external guides for humanity, it similarly entails the extension and continuation of this guidance after the Prophet's departure. Just as the Prophet's followers were in need of a guide during his lifetime, their need for a guide extends after his death. Al-Shaykh al-Mufīd states that all Imāmīs (Twelver-Shī'ites) are in agreement that it is necessary for there to be at all times an Imam (or a divine guide) who may be taken as a proof by God before his creation; and that the Imam's existence results in the complete benefit of religion.<sup>20</sup> In addition to Divine Grace, this notion is supported by the Qur'ānic verse: "For every nation (or people) there is a guide."<sup>21</sup> Thus, the Imam functions as the divine guide, and there can never be a time on earth, until the end of times, without the existence of an Imam. We will return to this point a little later.

Therefore, Twelver-Shī'ites have argued for the characteristics of the Imam as being similar to those of the Prophet or Messenger. The only major difference is the Imam does not receive divine revelations (*al-wahy*) but acquires his knowledge through an intermediary, that is, immediately from the Prophet or Messenger, or from the preceding Imam, ultimately ending in the Prophet or Messenger. Thus, since the Imam's function is essentially the same as that of the Prophet and he is considered his successor, the Imam is considered to possess the same qualifications or characteristics as the Prophet. That is to say, the Imam must be (1) immune

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<sup>18</sup> Al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Awā'il al-Maqālāt*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Qur'ān, 33:40.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Awā'il al-Maqālāt*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Qur'ān, 13:7.

from all sins and error-free (*ma'ṣūm*), (2) he must be superior (*al-afḍal*) in his knowledge and virtues over the people of his time, and (3) he must possess all noble virtues and no moral or physical defects. These characteristics must extend from the moment of his birth until his death. (4) Finally, the Imam must also be explicitly appointed by the Prophet or Messenger, or by his inerrant predecessor. That is to say, the Imam cannot be chosen by the people, in the same way that the Prophet or Messenger is not chosen by the people. Now, must the Imam necessarily be able to perform miracles like the Prophet? Here, there is difference of opinion, with most Twelver-Shī'ite scholars suggesting that, while it is certainly possible that God may allow an Imam to perform a miracle, this is not necessary, since what is necessary and sufficient is the explicit appointment or designation (*al-naṣṣ*) of the Imam by God through the Prophet.

## V. The Twelve Imams

As their name suggests, Twelver-Shī'ites believe in the existence of twelve successive Imams after the Prophet Muḥammad. The first Imam is 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad, followed by his two sons, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, followed by nine successive descendants from al-Ḥusayn, the twelfth and last of which is Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Mahdī. Twelver-Shī'ite belief is that each and every one of the twelve Imams was designated and appointed by the Prophet himself and reconfirmed with each Imam's immediate predecessor. Twelver-Shī'ite sources of *ḥadīth* or prophetic tradition are replete with reports on the authority of the Prophet Muḥammad that explicitly state that the number of his successors are twelve and also include each of their names. Some of these reports may also be found in major Sunnī collections of *ḥadīth*, such as *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, although in these sources, the names of the successors are not mentioned, but the number twelve is, including reference to all being from the Arabian tribe of Quraysh—the same tribe that Muḥammad belonged to. Those of you who are familiar with the Judeo-Christian tradition may find the number twelve interesting as well, as in the case of the twelve tribes of the Children of Israel or the twelve apostles or disciples of Jesus. While Sunnī traditions would specify that the twelve successors would hail from Quraysh, Twelver-Shī'ites would emphasize that they were to be from the specific clan of Banū Hāshim, the immediate family members of the Prophet. More so, they would descend from the Prophet's daughter Fāṭima and her husband 'Alī, and specifically from their son al-Ḥusayn.

Before I conclude my talk, I'd like to very briefly note some of the historical incidents that are related to the doctrine of Imamology as espoused by Twelver-Shī'ites. We will focus on three main events.

The first pertains to the Twelver-Shī'ite argument of the appointment of the first Imam, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. Twelver-Shī'ites present several historical incidents as proof of the Prophet Muḥammad's appointment of 'Alī as his successor. The most important of these incidents is what is referred to as the event of Ghadīr Khumm. This incident took place approximately two months before the Prophet Muḥammad's death. Historians note that after performing the final pilgrimage to Mecca (*ḥajjat al-widā'*), the Prophet and his companions were returning to the city of Medina. On the way home, the Prophet received a Qur'ānic revelation: "O Messenger! Convey what has been revealed to you from your Lord, and if you do not, then you will not have conveyed His message, and God will protect you from the people."<sup>22</sup> At this point, the Prophet stopped at an area between Mecca and Medina known as Ghadīr Khumm and ordered everyone to gather. He then delivered a sermon, in which he declared the following statement: "He whose *mawlā* I am, 'Alī is his *mawlā*." Twelver-Shī'ites would interpret the word *mawlā* here to mean "master" or "leader" and to take this as an explicit designation of 'Alī as the Prophet's successor. Furthermore, they would suggest that after this announcement, the Prophet Muḥammad received another Qur'ānic revelation: "Today, I have perfected for you your religion, and completed My blessing upon you, and have approved for you Islam as a religion."<sup>23</sup> This event would form the primary basis for the Twelver-Shī'ite argument of the necessity of the Imāmate and specifically the condition of explicit designation (*naṣṣ*) of the Imam, that is to say, that the Imam must be divinely appointed.

The second major event would be the massacre of the third Imam, al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, at Karbala, on the tenth day of Muḥarram (or, 'Āshūrā') in the year 61/680, by an Umayyad army during the reign of the second Umayyad ruler Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya. I think it may be firmly argued that the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn is the single most important event in the history of Shī'ism.

Professor Mahmoud Ayoub has written a seminal work entitled *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism*, which explores the place of Imam

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<sup>22</sup> Qur'ān, 5:67.

<sup>23</sup> Qur'ān, 5:3.

Ḥusayn and his commemoration in Shīʿism. I’ve written an unpublished paper, in which I argue that the place and role of Imam Ḥusayn in the Twelver-Shīʿite worldview is unmatched by another figure within the tradition.

Finally, the third major event would be the occultation (*al-ghayba*) of the twelfth Imam, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan, known as al-Mahdī. Twelver-Shīʿite belief holds the twelfth Imam to have entered into a state of occultation, or “hiding,” at the age of 5 after the death of his father the eleventh Imam al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī in 260/874 in Samarra, Iraq. This state of hiding would consist of two stages. The first is known as the Minor Occultation (*al-ghayba al-ṣuḡhrā*), and lasted for approximately 70 years, from 260-329/874-941. During this time, the twelfth Imam was only accessible to the community through his four successive agents. The second stage began in 329/941, with the death of the fourth and final agent, and continues indefinitely. It is known as the Major Occultation (*al-ghayba al-kubrā*). During this period, which continues until today, Twelver-Shīʿite belief is that the Imam is inaccessible to the masses, neither directly nor indirectly. This period will only end at some undefined point before the end of the world, when God will permit the twelfth Imam to “reappear” and to establish peace and justice in the world, along with Jesus, as the messiah. The doctrine of the occultation forms a very important aspect of Twelver-Shīʿite belief. As we’ve noted earlier, Twelver-Shīʿism considers it necessary that there is a continuous and uninterrupted chain of divine guides in the world. There can never be a time without one. Therefore, the twelfth Imam is considered alive and will continue to remain alive until he reappears. Once he reappears, he will fulfill his mission of establishing peace and justice on earth until the end of times.

## VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be clear from what has been said that Imamology is a multilayered doctrine that finds grounding in both Divine Grace and Prophetology. God’s Grace entails God’s sending inerrant exemplars to guide humanity. Some of these guides bring forth a new (or renewed) message from God, while others function as guardians over previous divine revelations. There must, moreover, always exist a divine guide on earth. This is the essential function of the Imam in Twelver-Shīʿite thought. His role is to ensure the continuance and protection of the divine message, in all place and at all times.