

Shi'a Islam

By Mike Edens

Founder: Muhammad¹ ibn Abdullah (570-632 AD)

Scripture and Authoritative Texts: The Qur'an, the scripture the Prophet Muhammad said he received by dictation from the angel Jibra'il (Gabriel) and Shi'a collections of al Hadith,² which are sayings and deeds attributed to Muhammad.

Types of Islam: There are about 1.8 billion³ Muslims in the world which accounts for 21% of the world population.

Sunni: (the path) 90%

Shi'a: (party of Ali) 9%, 122 million. The vast majority of Shi'ites, about 61 million,⁴ live in the country of Iran.

The remaining 1% consists of various sects including Sufism, a mystical/experiential form of Islam and the Kharijites. Other Muslim sects include Ahmadiyya Islam, and the Nation of Islam.⁵ In just 1,400 years, Islam has grown to be the second largest religion in the world.

HISTORY

Muhammad⁶ was born about 570 AD in Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula in present-day Saudi Arabia. At the age of 40 during meditation in a cave on the mountain of Hira, he reportedly heard the voice of the angel Gabriel who gave him the initial words of the Qur'an (Arabic for "recite"). Over the next 23 years, additional chapters (*surahs*) of the Qur'an were progressively revealed to Muhammad first in Mecca and later in Medina. Muhammad recited this scripture to his companions who memorized them and taught them to others. First through oral recitation and later through written copies of the Qur'an, Islam's teachings spread throughout Arabia, the Middle East, and ultimately the world. The word "Islam" means submission. Muhammad's message included a rejection of polytheism and idolatry which was prevalent throughout Arabia. Muslims still include in their confession a submission to the one true God, Allah, and Muhammad as his prophet.

Muhammad married a wealthy widow, Khadijah.⁷ They had several sons and four daughters. All of their children died early except for only one daughter, Fatimah. Fatimah was later married to Muhammad's cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib. In 632, just a few years after returning from Medina and conquering Mecca, Muhammad died. By that time he had succeeded in uniting the majority of the Arabian Peninsula politically and spiritually under Islam. The years immediately following the prophet's death, however, were marked by controversy, violence, and a struggle for power among rival factions of the fledgling faith's followers.

Muhammad's death and the lack of consensus within the community as to whom he expected to lead after him gave opportunity for the natural tension to erupt into aggressive action. The golden era of Islam during which the religion and culture rapidly filled the heartland of the Middle East was also marked by the violent overthrow of warring rulers by assassination and intrigue.

While Muhammad's body was being buried by Ali and his family, the majority of the community met in the *saqifa* meeting hall. The three men leading the meeting were named as the next three rulers of Islam.⁸ All Muslim sources report that when Ali and Fatimah

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returned to their home, they were challenged to swear allegiance to the selected first Khalif, Abu Bakr. Through two deputations the leaders demanded Ali and Fatimah submit to the new leader. Because of their refusal, their house was destroyed and Fatimah, who was pregnant with their third child, was gravely injured. After Fatimah's death, Ali ceased to resist Abu Bakr. Although he bore the title "commander of the faithful," Ali withheld military support from the community until he was named the fourth Khalif.

Despite the bloodshed and conflict, the majority of Muslims continued to embrace the leadership of a succession of four close companions and trusted advisors of Muhammad known as the Rightly Guided Kalifs. Disputes over leadership eventually led to *Fitna* (upheaval or chaos), permanently dividing Muslims into two rival sects – Sunni and Shi'a. The majority who accepted the leadership of all four Caliphs became known as Sunni, meaning "the path." A minority rejected the authority of the first three Khalifs, maintaining that the fourth Khalif, Ali, was actually the first Imam. This sect of Islam became known as the Shi'a meaning "party of Ali." They insist that Ali and his descendents alone are the only rightful successors to leadership of the Muslim people following the Prophet's death.

For Shi'ites, all future leadership must come from *Ahl ul-Bayt* (the people of the house), referring to the household of Muhammad. Since Fatimah was the only surviving child, this must refer to her children, Hassan and Husayn. Even more, their father, Ali, was also Muhammad's cousin.

Shi'ites believe that the prophet clearly indicated that Allah intended this family to be the head of the Islamic nation. They point to one of many recorded sayings of Muhammad to illustrate this. "Train your children in three things: the love of your Prophet, the love of his progeny, (i.e. *Ahl ul-Bayt*), and the recitation of the Qur'an."⁹ The great Islamic debate is whether this meant that Ali and his descendants must lead Islam after Muhammad's death. In the al Hadith, (a collection of the sayings of Muhammad) he said, "The likeness of my *Ahl ul-Bayt* amongst my *ummah* (followers) is similar to Noah's Ark. Those who embarked on it were rescued and those who rejected it perished."¹⁰

Thus, the importance of Ali for Shi'ite Muslims is critical. Ali was raised in the same home with the prophet of Islam. He was Muhammad's cousin and the son of Abu Talib, the prophet's uncle and guardian. Also, Ali was also the first person to publicly commit to Islam after Muhammad began to proclaim the religion (Ali was 10 years old at the time).

The Shi'ites also note that Muhammad seemed to have favored Ali to lead after him. Muhammad was asked who the nation was to obey after his passing and replied, "they are, after me, my successors and the guides of Muslims; the first of them is Ali ibn Abi Talib; then Hassan, and Husayn..."¹¹ Nevertheless, after his death, only a minority of the community supported Ali to be the *khalif*. The majority supported Abu Bakr.

Ali was recognized as the fourth Khalif (656-661 A.D.) by virtually all Muslims after the murder of the third caliph Uthman. Ali, however, moved the seat of government to Iraq and the conflict over leadership continued with strong opposition from Muawiya, the Syrian governor. Ali sought a truce with him when the Syrian forces placed pages of the Qur'an on their spears and swords. Ali refused to fight against them and the Qur'an. As a result of this truce, a group of Muslims turned their back on Ali as leader and formed the *Kharijite* faction who rejected all human leaders to follow Allah directly. Members of this group murdered Ali in 661 AD. The Shi'a esteem their martyred leader not as the fourth but as the first in a succession of Imams.

Hasan Ibn Ali Ibn Abi Talib was the son of the Ali and Fatimah, the grandson of Muhammad. After Ali's death, the Shi'ites offered the Khalif position to him. He declined due to the lack of unity. Shi'ites regard him as the Second Imam. Husayn Ibn Ali Ibn Abi Talib was the younger son of Ali and Fatimah. Shi'ites regard him as the Third Imam after Ali. Husayn was killed at the Battle of Kerbala in on the 10th day of Muhammad (the first month of the Islamic calendar year) AD 680 while seeking to consolidate opposition to the ruling Syrian Khalif. Each year the Shi'a mourn his death with the fast of 'Ashura.

DOCTRINE

In addition to conflict over leadership, there are important differences between Shi'a and Sunni on some key terminology and doctrines – particularly on eschatology.

Imam: For Sunni Muslims, an Imam is simply the leader of prayer in a local mosque or *masjid*. As a community's religious leader, he must be well versed in Arabic and the Qur'an. Within Shi'a Islam, however, the term refers to the sole leader of the whole Islamic world. Each Imam must be a male descendent of the first Imam, Ali.

The role of Imam developed into a specific doctrinal distinctive of Shi'a Islam through their belief in "the imamate" which gradually took final form before 1000 AD. The Imamate produced their own set of books interpreting the Qur'an and recording the sayings of the prophet (*al Hadith*). At points they recognize variant readings of the Qur'an from the Uthmanic text of the Qur'an used by the Sunnis.¹² The twelfth and final Imam disappeared in 874 AD.¹³ It is believed that he is occulted or hidden only to appear at the end time as the Mahdi.

Mahdi: All Muslims believe that Islam will experience a final leader who will dominate the world at the end of human history. He is known as the Mahdi. Ibn Khaldoun, a Sunni historian in the third Islamic century wrote in *al-Muqaddimah*, "...there must appear a man at the end of time from the family of the Prophet, who will strengthen Islam and spread justice; Muslims will follow him and he will gain domination. He will be called al-Mahdi."¹⁴ Most Muslims believe that Jesus, who will also appear in the end-times, will be a follower of the Mahdi and show his support by submitting to his worship leadership. Some Muslim sects, however, believe that the Mahdi is in fact Jesus. All these positions are supported by various readings and interpretations of the Hadith.

For most Shi'ites, the Mahdi is understood to be the son of Imam Hasan al-Askari. They believe that he is still alive but hidden, and awaits the proper time to appear. The Sunni view is that the Mahdi is some other person who is possibly yet unborn.

Twelvers: The largest branch of Shi'a Islam is the Twelver or Imami Shi'a Muslims. The name Twelvers comes from their belief that Allah commissioned Twelve Imams after Muhammad to lead the people. The final Imam vanished from history and is considered to be in hiding until his eventual return in the last days as the Mahdi (divinely guided deliverer). Approximately 85% of Shi'a are Twelvers.¹⁵

Human leadership and authority: The distinctive Shi'a doctrine is the *Imamat* – the divinely appointed leader. The rank of the *Imamat* (the position of a divinely-appointed leader) is higher than prophethood and messengership – except the Prophet Muhammad. These Imams are believed to have knowledge of whatever occurred in the past and whatever will happen in the future, and nothing is concealed from them. No one compiled the Qur'an completely except the Imams, and they encompass all of its knowledge.¹⁶

History of the Imamate and development of Shi'a: The ultimate division of Islam into two major divisions is foreshadowed in tensions between the *asara* (warriors, leaders of the community and companions of Muhammad) and *ahl ul-beit* (the people of the house) during his life. Part of the Qur'an is dedicated to regulation of this tension.¹⁷ As the warfare with Mecca subsided several instances of Hadith point to his attempt to manage reconciliation of this tension.¹⁸ Following his death, however, the two strongest witnesses, his daughter Fatimah and his youngest and most vocal wife, Aisha, offered conflicting testimony of the prophet's intent.

This major rift between Shi'a and Sunni has never fully healed and continues to this day. Any such division in Islam is clearly prohibited by the Qur'an, "The believers are but a single brotherhood. So make peace and reconciliation between your two

contending brothers, and observe your duty to Allah, that you may receive mercy.”¹⁹ Despite this, there is significant division in Islam. To this day, much of the violence in radical Islam is Muslim vs. Muslim – Shi'a vs. Sunni.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Although God has commanded Christians to love their neighbors for a long time, you may be the first follower and disciple of Christ with whom your Shi'ite friend has been in relationship. Christians are commanded to be witnesses and confess Jesus Christ as the way to reconciliation with God.

As with all Muslims, Christians need to respond as a caring neighbor to Shi'a Muslims. Get to know them and ask questions. There are many varieties of Shi'a Islam so let your friend describe his faith and religious practices. Share with him the impact that Jesus Christ, his substitutionary death on the Cross, and forgiveness has made in your life and family.

Christians should be faithful witnesses to the incarnate Word of God, Jesus of Nazareth. Unlike Sunni Muslims, your Shi'a friend has a cultural and religious expectation that those who serve God may suffer. Ali, Fatimah, and Husayn all suffered greatly. So, it is not strange to the Shi'a that the Christ might have been sent to suffer, however no Muslim understands that God is capable to become a man nor are they able to understand that the purpose of that event was to reconcile God and his human creation.

Notes

- ¹ Bringing Arabic words into an English document is not a precise act. Vowels and doubling of consonants vary in English documents. Muhammad and Muhammed are two of several valid attempts.
- ² Shi'ites prefer hadith attributed to the Ahl al-Bayt and close associates, and have their own separate collection of al Hadith. See "Shi'ite Islam" by Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Tabataba'i (1979), 41-44.
- ³ "Contemporary figures for Islam are usually between 1 billion and 1.8 billion, [but] 1 billion... appears to be dated, however." "Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents," http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html #Islam (accessed August 1, 2012).
- ⁴ Estimates for Shi'ite population in Iran range between 61 and 70 million or about 93-97% of the total population. "Top 15 Countries with Highest Proportion of Shiites in the Population," http://www.adherents.com/largecom/com_shiite.html (accessed August 1, 2012).
- ⁵ Separate 4-page Profiles have been published on these sects: Eric Pement, "The Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam," and Ron Carter, "The Nation of Islam," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2012). A complete Profile Notebook (over 400 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook.htm.
- ⁶ This history section is based on an earlier Profile on Islam which is focused mainly on the Sunni faith. It is recommended that you read that Profile first. See James Walker, "Islam," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2012).
- ⁷ Muhammad was monogamous during his first marriage but after Khadijah died he took about a dozen wives and concubines. Khadijah was fifteen years older than Muhammad and his youngest wife, Aisha, was six years old when she married the prophet. Their marriage was consummated when she was nine or ten. George W. Braswell, *Islam: Its Prophet, Peoples, Politics, and Power*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 17.
- ⁸ Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman.
- ⁹ Ayathllah Sayyid Kamal Faghih Imani trans Sayyid Abbas Sadr-ameli. "A Bundle of Flowers from the Garden of Traditions of the Prophet & Ahlul-Bayt," *The Love of Ahlul Bayt: Al-Jami-ul-Saghir*, vol. 1, 14, <http://www.al-islam.org/flowers> (accessed June 12, 2012).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, vol 27, 113, <http://www.al-islam.org/flowers>, (accessed Feb 8, 2012).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol.1, 253, <http://www.al-islam.org/flowers> (accessed March. 10, 2012).
- ¹² Following Muhammad's death, Muslims needed a complete, authorized written text. This culminated with the Uthmanic Recension, an edition of the Qur'an compiled by a committee under the direction of Uthman, the third rightly-guided Caliph, who commanded all other editions and variants destroyed. Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 93-94.
- ¹³ The twelve imam and their titles are Ali bin Abi Talib- al Murtaza, Hassan bin Ali- al Mujtaba, Husayn bin Ali- al Shaheed, Ali bin Husayn- al Sajjad, Muhammed bin Ali- al Baqir, Jaffer bin Muhammed- al Sadiq, Musa bin Jaffer- al Kazim, Ali bin Musa- al Riza, Muhammed bin Ali- al Naqi, Ali bin Muhammed- al Taqi, Hassan bin Ali- al Askari, Muhammed bin Hassan- al Mahd.
- ¹⁴ Ibn Khaldun, *An Introduction to History*, (Princeton University Press, London, 1967), 257-258.
- ¹⁵ See Hussein Abdulwaheed Amin, "The Origins of the Sunni/Shi'a split in Islam," *Islam for Today*, www.islamfortoday.com/shia.htm (accessed Aug 1, 2012).
- ¹⁶ Shia Encyclopedia, "Imamat vs. Prophethood," Part 1, <http://www.al-islam.org/encyclopedia/chapter6b/8.html> (accessed Aug 1, 2012).
- ¹⁷ Qur'anic references to the veiling of wives and Muhammad being granting Zaid's wife (Qur'an 33:37), etc.
- ¹⁸ Two weighty matters, Ali's leadership of the last battle, speech at well.
- ¹⁹ Surah 49:10-11.



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