

An Analysis of the Concept of Imamate in the Teachings of Imam al-Riḍā (as): A Comparative Study with Other Islamic Schools of Thought, with an Emphasis on the Views of Fakhr al-Razi

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Abstract

The lineage of Imams begins with Prophet Ibrahim (as), whose attainment of this exalted station following multiple divine trials is explicitly stated in verse 124 of Surah al-Baqarah. Subsequently, this station was granted to other distinguished and specific figures. During the era of Imam al-Riḍā (as), the analysis of the meaning and nature of Imamate was a critical subject of debate, particularly as it was frequently conflated with the common notion of “Caliphate” among non-Shi’a scholars. The central question of this article is: How is the station and concept of Imamate analyzed in the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (as), particularly Imam al-Riḍā (as), and what is its fundamental distinction from the perspectives of other Islamic schools of thought? In addition to the Qur’an and the traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (as), this study focuses on *Tafsir al-Mizan* as a representative of Shi’a exegesis, and Fakhr al-Razi’s *Mafatih al-Ghayb* as a representative of Sunni exegesis. Within Shi’a thought, it is argued that the term “Imam” in verse 124 of Surah al-Baqarah denotes a station distinct from prophethood, as it was granted to Prophet Ibrahim (as) in his old age—a time when he had already attained the station of prophethood; thus, a redundant conferral of prophethood is logically untenable. Conversely, Fakhr al-Razi and certain other Sunni exegetes insist that the term “Imam” refers to the station of prophethood itself, enjoyed by all prophets. This article, written using a descriptive-analytical method and based on documentary research, concludes that the “Imam” referenced in the Qur’anic verse and the teachings of the Infallibles (as)—with an emphasis on the discourses of Imam Riḍā (as)—possesses a station superior to that of prophethood. This station is characterized by *wilāyah* (divine authority), *‘ismah* (infallibility), and divine knowledge.

Keywords: Imamate, Prophethood, Qur’an, *Itrah* (Ahl al-Bayt) (as), Imam al-Riḍā (as), Shi’a.

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Introduction

Since the era of the Prophet (pbuh), the subject of Imamate has been a focal point of continuous scholarly discourse, spanning debates, polemics, epistolary exchanges, and extensive academic treatises across various Islamic schools of thought. In certain historical instances, these intellectual disputes even unfolded in the presence of various caliphs and sovereigns. Indeed, if one were to attempt to catalog the approximate volume of scholarly works and the historical background of Imamate discourses, the result would encompass a vast library spanning multiple global languages. However, the primary concern and innovation of this research lies in the analysis of the infallible discourse of the descendant of the Family of Moḥammad (pbuh), Imam al-Riḍā (as), in response to opposing ideologies—an analysis that provided answers to the great Sunni scholars, including Fakhr al-Razi, more than 1,200 years ago.

Based on the authoritative interpretations of the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, the station of Imamate is considered one of the unique divine ranks bestowed upon certain prophets. Attaining this divine station necessitates specific qualities that are manifested through divine trials and tribulations. Regarding verse 124 of Surah al-Baqarah, which addresses the Imamate of Prophet Ibrahim (as), extensive commentary exists within both Shi'a and Sunni exegetical traditions. A significant point of divergence arises in the interpretation of the term *imaman* (an Imam) used in this verse, which signifies the divine reward granted to Ibrahim (as) following his successful completion of divine tests.

Shi'a exegetes—including those of *Al-Tibyān* (Tusi, 1409, 1:449), *Majma' al-Bayān* (Tabarsi, 1372, 1:193), *Ālā' al-Raḥmān* (Balaghi, 1420, 1:12), *Mawāhib al-Raḥmān* (Musawi Sabzawari, 1409, 2:10), *Tasnīm* (Javadi Amoli, 1386, 6:461), *Nemuneh* (Makarem Shirazi, 1384, 1:437), *Makhzan al-Irfān* (Banou Isfahani, 1361, 2:64), and *Partoy-i az Qur'an* (Taleghani, 1362, 1:291), among others—maintain that the Imamate of Ibrahim (as) was granted after his prophethood. They view it as a divine grace bestowed upon him during his old age.

In contrast, Sunni exegetes, most notably Fakhr al-Razi, insist that this station pertains to the period prior to Ibrahim's (as) prophethood. Other prominent Sunni scholars share this view, such as al-Alusi (1415, 1:374) in *Ruh al-Ma'ani* and Rashid Riḍā (n.d., 1:455) in *al-Manār*, who endorsed Fakhr al-Razi's position. It should be noted that some Sunni works, such as *al-Kashshāf* (Zamakhshari, 1407, 1:183), bypass the issue without explicit comment. Others have interpreted the term as meaning “exemplar” (*qudwah*) or “leader” (*muqtadā*), a meaning that does not transcend the station of prophethood; examples of this include *Rūḥ al-Bayān* (Haqqi, n.d.,



1:223) and *al-Basiṭ* (Bayḍāwī, 1421, 1:135). It is evident that these scholars are aware of the theological implications: if they were to argue otherwise, they would inadvertently validate the Shi'a perspective, or if they were to suggest that the granting of Imamate as prophethood occurred after his prophethood, they would be engaging in a logical redundancy (*taḥṣīl al-ḥāṣil*). Consequently, they have adopted this view to avoid these two pitfalls.

Conversely, Shi'a exegetes, including Allameh Tabataba'i and many others, contend that the "Imam" mentioned in this noble verse refers to a station distinct from prophethood. They maintain that this station was granted during the latter years of his life and is a rank superior to prophethood, bestowed upon him following his stages of servitude (*'ubudīyyah*), prophethood (*nubuwwah*), and messengership (*risālah*). To substantiate this claim, they rely on numerous evidences, most notably the traditions (*aḥādīth*) of the Ahl al-Bayt (as).

The Meaning of Imamate in the Thought of Shi'a Scholars

The concept of Imamate is defined by Shi'a scholars through several interconnected dimensions:

1. **Leadership in both religious and worldly affairs.** (Fadl ibn Hasan al-Tabarsi, *Tafsir Jawami' al-Jami'*, Vol. 1, p. 77; Ali ibn al-Husayn al-Sayyid al-Murtada, *Rasail*, Vol. 1, p. 5).

2. **Vicarious leadership in religious and worldly affairs on behalf of the Prophet (pbuh).** This leadership is considered a rational necessity (*wajib 'aqli*), as Imamate is viewed as a divine grace (*luṭf*). Consequently, the Imam must be infallible (*ma'sūm*), designated by divine appointment (*manṣūṣ*), and the most excellent member of the community. As Allameh al-Hilli articulates: "*Imamate is a general leadership in the religious and worldly affairs of a specific individual, acting as a deputy to the Prophet. It is rationally necessary because Imamate is a divine grace; therefore, the Imam must be infallible, divinely designated, and the most superior of the subjects*" (Hasan ibn Yusuf al-Hilli, *al-Bab al-Hadi 'Ashar*, pp. 10–12).

In the terminology of Allameh al-Hilli, "*Imamate is the general leadership in religion and the world for a specific individual, acting as a deputy to the Prophet*" (Hasan ibn Yusuf al-Hilli, 1413: 66; *ibid.*, 1365: 10–12; Moḥammadi, 1378: 403). Similarly, Mir Sharif al-Jurjāni writes: "*Imamate is the succession to the Messenger in the establishment of religion, such that following him becomes obligatory upon the entire community*" (Sharif al-Jurjani, *Sharh al-Mawaqif*, Vol. 8, p. 345; Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani, *Sharh al-Maqasid*, Vol. 5, p. 234). Sayyid al-Murtada further elaborates: "*Just as the necessity for a Prophet (pbuh) arises from the need to articulate divine laws, invite to obedience of the Lord, and other*



matters, there is an equal necessity for someone to act as his successor in preserving the Sharia... a person who possesses infallibility (*ismah*) and is free from error, oversight, or concealment” (Sayyid al-Murtada, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 178).

Furthermore, Imamate entails the realization of the objectives and programs of religion, encompassing governance in its broadest sense, the implementation of divine limits (*ḥudūd*) and rulings, the administration of justice, and the cultivation and edification of souls—both externally and internally. This station is considered superior to the stations of Prophethood (*nubuwwah*) and Messengership (*risālah*). While Prophethood and Messengership primarily involve the transmission of divine communications, the delivery of commands, and the conveying of glad tidings and warnings, the Imamate encompasses all these functions while adding the continuous execution of divine laws and the holistic spiritual and outward nurturing of human souls.

The Imam is divinely appointed, infallible, divinely supported (*mu’ayyad*), and possesses comprehensive knowledge of all sciences pertaining to both the temporal (*ma’āsh*) and the eschatological (*ma’ād*) realms of mankind. He is the most excellent of his era in terms of inner virtues, and the deeds of all servants are not hidden from his knowledge. The earth is never devoid of his presence. (It is, however, noted that a number of prophets also held the station of Imamate) (Moḥammad Husayn Tabataba’i, *al-Mizān fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, Vol. 1, pp. 272–275).

The Imamate and the authority of *Wilāyah* (divine guardianship) following the Prophet (PBUH) are established through divine designation (*naṣb ilāhi*). Regarding the verse, “Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due” (Qur’an 4:58), the following commentary is provided: “The ‘trusts’ (*amanat*) refer to the Imamate. Allah has made it an obligation upon the [preceding] Imam to fulfill the trust by appointing the one whom Allah has commanded after him. Subsequently, Allah addresses the people: ‘Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority (*ulī al-amr*) among you,’ meaning the Imams; thus, the ‘trusts’ are the Imamate” (Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi, *Tafsīr al-Qummi*, Vol. 1, pp. 148–150; Ali al-Astarabadi, *Ta’wīl al-Āyāt al-Zāhirah*, Vol. 1, p. 141).

Another of the most critical characteristics and duties of the Imam, acting as the “father of the community,” is the purification (*tazkīyah*) and education (*ta’līm*) of the people. This very purpose is reflected in the supplications of Prophet Ibrahim (as) during the construction of the Kaaba: “Our Lord, and send among them a Messenger from themselves who will recite to them Your verses and teach them the Book and wisdom and purify them. Indeed, You are the Exalted in Might, the Wise” (Qur’an 2:129).



Once this supplication is answered, the sequence of spiritual development places purification (*tazkīyah*) prior to instruction (*ta'lim*): *"It is He who has sent among the unlettered a Messenger from themselves, reciting to them His verses and purifying them and teaching them the Book and wisdom, although they were before in clear error"* (Qur'an 62:2).

Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) identifies the most fundamental duties of a just Imam as the guidance of humanity: leading them through a known *Sunnah* (tradition) and extinguishing an unknown *Bid'ah* (innovation). In *Nahj al-Balaghah*, he states: *"Know that the most excellent of Allah's servants in the sight of Allah is a just Imam, who was guided and [in guiding others], he established a known Sunnah and extinguished an unknown innovation. Verily, the Sunan (traditions) are luminous and have clear signs, and the Bid'ah (innovations) are manifest and have clear signs. Indeed, the worst of people in the sight of Allah is an oppressive Imam, who went astray and caused others to go astray, thereby extinguishing a taken Sunnah and reviving an abandoned innovation"* (*Nahj al-Balaghah*, Sermon 163).

Imamate in the Teachings of Imam al-Riḍā (as)

Regarding the nature of Imamate, Imam Ali ibn Musa al-Riḍā (as) states:

"Imamate is far more sublime, majestic, exalted, fortified, and profound than people can comprehend through their own intellects, or grasp through their personal opinions and beliefs, or even select through their own choice. Imamate is a station that Allah, following Prophethood and the station of *Khalīllah* (the Intimate Friend), specifically designated to Ibrahim al-Khalil (as) as a third rank, thereby honoring him with this virtue and exalting his name. Allah says: *'Indeed, I will make you an Imam for the people'* (Qur'an 2:124)—meaning, 'O Ibrahim, I have chosen you as an Imam for the people.' In joy, Ibrahim (as) asked: *'And [will You appoint Imams] from my descendants?'* (Qur'an 2:124). Allah replied: *'My covenant does not encompass the wrongdoers'* (Qur'an 2:124). This verse invalidates the Imamate of any oppressor until the Day of Resurrection; thus, the Imamate was established among the virtuous and the pure.

Subsequently, by placing the Imamate among the virtuous and pure within his lineage, Allah honored him, saying: *'And We gave him Isaac and Jacob as an additional gift; and We made each of them righteous, and We made them leaders [Imams] guiding by Our command. And We inspired to them the performance of good deeds, the establishment of prayer, and the giving of zakāt; and they were worshippers of Us'* (Qur'an 21:73–74). Thus, Isaac and Jacob were granted to him as an additional blessing; all were rendered righteous, and they were made Imams who guided by Our



command. We inspired them to perform good deeds, establish prayer, and give zakat, and they were devoted worshippers of Us. In this manner, the Imamate remained within his lineage, passed from one generation to the next as an inheritance, until the Prophet of Islam (pbuh) became its heir." (Al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, Vol. 1, p. 198, Chapter: *Rare Narrations regarding the Virtue and Attributes of the Imam*).

Regarding the necessity of the Imam's existence, Imam al-Riḍā (as) further explains:

"...If Allah had not appointed for them a steadfast, trustworthy, and protective guardian (*qayyūm*, *amīn*, *ḥāfiẓ*), the *Millah* (divine community/faith) would have perished, the religion would have vanished, and the *Sunan* (traditions) and *Ahkam* (rulings) would have been altered. Innovators (*mubtadi'ūn*) would have encroached upon it, and atheists/heretics (*mulhidūn*) would have diminished it, making these distortions appear ambiguous to the Muslims. We observe that mankind is deficient, in need, and imperfect, compounded by their differences, the divergence of their desires, and their fragmented perspectives. Had He not appointed for them a steadfast guardian to preserve what the Messenger (pbuh) brought, they would have corrupted it in the manner we have explained; the laws, traditions, rulings, faith, and religion would have been transformed, ultimately resulting in the destruction of all creation..." (Al-Saduq, 1378, Vol. 2, p. 101).

Regarding the verse, "*Then We caused the successors [heirs] of the Book to inherit it*" (Qur'an 17:9), Imam al-Riḍā (as) was asked for an explanation, to which he replied:

"The heirs of the Book and the precursors in good deeds are the children of Fatima (as). The [third category is] the *Muqtasid* (the moderate/restrained one), who is the one who recognizes the Imam; and the [final category is] the one who wrongs himself, who is the one who fails to recognize the Imam." (Al-Kulayni, 1401, Vol. 1, p. 215).

Upon arriving in Merv and observing the disputes among the people regarding the Imamate, Imam al-Riḍā (as) remarked: "*They failed to recognize the Imamate, so they could not recognize the Imam. Just as Allah is known through His Divinity (Uluḥīyyah), the Imam is known through his Imamate.*" He then proceeded to enumerate the characteristics of the Imam:

"...Indeed, the Imamate is of a more sublime degree, a more majestic station, a higher position, a more fortified side, and a more profound depth than people can reach through their intellects, attain through their opinions, or establish through their own choice. Allah, the Mighty and Majestic, specifically designated the Imamate to Ibrahim al-Khalil (as) after the stations of Prophethood and *Khullah* (intimacy) as a third rank and a virtue



through which He honored him and exalted his mention, saying: ‘*Indeed, I will make you an Imam for the people*’ (Qur’an 2:124)...’ (Ibid.).

He continued by describing the unique nature of the Imam:

“The Imam is the Trust of Allah (*Amīn Allah*) among His creation, His Proof (*Hujjah*) over His servants, His Vicegerent (*Khalifah*) in His lands, the Caller to Allah, and the Defender of the sanctity of Allah. The Imam is purified from sin and cleared of all defects; he is uniquely endowed with knowledge and characterized by forbearance (*Hilm*). He is the regulator of the religion, the glory of the Muslims, the bane of the hypocrites, and the destruction of the disbelievers. The Imam is the unique one of his era; no one can equal him, no scholar can rival him, he has no substitute, and he has no peer...” (Ibid., pp. 200–201).

Regarding the signs of the Imam, Imam al-Riḍā (as) states:

“The Imam possesses certain signs: he is the most knowledgeable of the people, the wisest, the most God-fearing (*atqā*), the most forbearing (*aḥlām*), the most courageous, the most generous, and the most devout of worshippers... He is closer to the people than they are to themselves, and more compassionate toward them than their own fathers and mothers. He is the most humble before Allah, Exalted is His mention. He is the one who most strictly adheres to what he commands and is the most restrained from what he forbids. His supplication is answered; indeed, if he were to supplicate against a rock, it would split in two. He possesses the weapons of the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) and his sword, *Dhul-Fiqr*, and he holds a register (*ṣaḥīfah*) containing the names of his followers (*shi’a*) until the Day of Resurrection...” (Al-Saduq, 1413 AH, Vol. 4, pp. 418–419).

Abu al-Salt al-Harawi, a servant of Imam al-Riḍā (as), recounts:

“Imam al-Riḍā (as) used to converse with everyone in their own language. By Allah, he was the most eloquent and the most knowledgeable in every language and dialect! One day I said to him: ‘O son of the Prophet! I am amazed that you are acquainted with all these languages, despite their various differences.’ He replied: ‘O Abu al-Salt! I am the Proof of Allah (*Hujjatullah*) over His creation, and Allah would not appoint a Proof over a people whom He is not acquainted with in their own languages...” (‘*Uyun al-Akhbar*, Vol. 2, p. 228; *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 26, p. 190).

Furthermore, Allameh Tabataba’i, interpreting verse 71 of Surah al-Isra, argues that the Imamate is not a temporary station restricted to a specific era:

“By the decree of the verse, ‘*The Day We shall call every people with their Imam*’ (Qur’an 17:71), the Imam is he who, on the Day when the inward becomes manifest, drives the people toward Allah, just as he guides them toward Allah in both the apparent (*ẓāhir*) and the hidden (*bāṭin*)



aspects of this world. This noble verse conveys not only this point but also implies that the station of Imamate is not a position that is exempt from any period of human history or any era of time; rather, it must exist throughout all ages and epochs, unless the human race is entirely removed from the earth.” (Moḥammad Husayn Tabataba’i, *al-Mizān*, Vol. 1, p. 413).

Imamate is the station of comprehensive leadership—encompassing the material and the spiritual, the physical and the metaphysical, and the apparent and the hidden. The Imam is the head of the government, the leader of society, the religious guide, the educator of morals, and the inward, spiritual leader. On one hand, through his spiritual power, he guides worthy individuals on the path of internal perfection (*takamul batin*). Through the authority of his knowledge, he educates the ignorant. And through his governmental power, or other executive capacities, he implements the principles of justice.

Accordingly, the station of Imamate is a rank higher than these, even surpassing Prophethood (*Nubuwwah*) and Messengership (*Risālah*). This is the very station that Ibrahim (as) received from Allah after undergoing numerous trials of worthiness; it is this same station that has been granted to his chosen progeny, among whom the Noble Prophet (pbuh) is the most eminent and chosen of all.

Consequently, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The Imam is incomparable to any other human being, and his station is beyond the comprehension of ordinary mankind.
2. The earth shall never be devoid of the Divine Proof (*Hujjah*) and the Imam.
3. The Imam possesses the station of Divine Designation (*Naṣb Ilāhi*), infallibility (*Ismah*), and the mandate for guidance; his knowledge is inherently dependent upon Divine Knowledge.
4. The Imam holds the authority of leadership over the people, both materially and spiritually, and both externally and internally.
5. In its general definition, Imamate encompasses Prophethood; indeed, some Prophets have also held the station of Imamate.
6. The Imam possesses the authority of leadership over the people for the purpose of establishing Divine laws, upholding equity and justice, and eradicating oppression and tyranny.

Imamate from the Perspective of Other Islamic Schools of Thought

Among the Shi’a, the Zaydis believe that Imamate was explicitly designated (*mansus*) up to Imam al-Husayn (as); however, after him, it is restricted to the progeny of Fatimah (as). They acknowledge the Imamate of Ali (as), al-Hasan (as), al-Husayn (as), and Zayd ibn Ali (as). (Moḥammad ibn Moḥammad ibn Nu’mān al-Mufid, *Awa’il al-Maqalat*,



Vol. 4, p. 39). Unlike the Twelver Shi'a, who uphold the doctrine of "manifest designation" (*nass jali*), the Zaydis subscribe to "hidden designation" (*nass khafi*). They argue that the designation made by the Prophet (pbuh) regarding Ali (as) was a "hidden designation"—meaning the appointment was kept secret and disclosed only to certain select companions for specific interests. Consequently, they regard the Caliphates of Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman as valid; they contend that the succession of Abu Bakr and Umar was correct in order to appease the social unrest (*fitnah*), given that Ali ibn Abi Talib fought against the polytheists during the lifetime of the Prophet (pbuh), resulting in the deaths of many of his kinsmen and the fathers of the Companions. This led to a deep-seated resentment among them, making them unwilling to accept his Caliphate. In contrast to the Imamate of the "superior" (*al-fāḍil*), which would be Ali (as), the Zaydis also accept the Imamate of the "lesser" (*al-maḍḍūl*); they argue that even in the presence of a superior individual, the appointment of a less prominent (*maḍḍūl*) individual as Imam is permissible. By this logic, they regard Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman—who were the *maḍḍūl*—as Imams. (Moḥammad Jawad Mashkur, *Farhang-e Firaq-e Islami*, p. 215).

Furthermore, they believe that anyone who possesses knowledge, courage, generosity, and asceticism (*zuhd*), and who rises up against oppressors and calls the people to his leadership, is an Imam. (Ahmad Mahmud Subhi, *al-Zaydiyyah*, p. 234). They do not accept a child as an Imam, they do not consider infallibility (*'ismah*) to be a prerequisite for Imamate, and they do not permit the existence of more than one Imam at a single time. Finally, they do not believe in the doctrine of the Return (*Raj'at*). Whenever a Muslim council (*shurā*) elects one of the descendants of Imam al-Hasan or Imam al-Husayn (as) to the Imamate, he becomes an Imam whose obedience is mandatory (*wājib al-tā'ah*). The most vital creedal pillar of the Zaydis is "Enjoining the Good and Forbidding the Evil" (*al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar*); in reality, the Imamate is subordinate to this pillar, and the requirement for the Imam to rise by the sword is rooted in this very principle. The Zaydi sect is the closest to the Sunnis among the Shi'a denominations, and they hold numerous theological (*kalāmi*) and jurisprudential (*fiqhi*) differences with the Imamiyyah. (Moḥammad Jawad Mashkur, *ibid.*, pp. 217–219).

For the Zaydis, the subject of Imamate is a social and political necessity within the Muslim community, more so than a mere religious necessity or a component of a theological system. It should be noted, however, that the Zaydis believe in the religious authority (*marja' iyyah*) of the Ahl al-Bayt (as), which is not necessarily linked to their political theory regarding Imamate. In other words, they do not posit a necessary



correlation between Imamate and religious leadership and political leadership, although they do discuss the religious conditions and duties of the Imam—that is, the Islamic ruler. Naturally, in such a view, “designated Imamate” (*al-imāmah al-manṣūṣah*) loses its meaning and concept, as the Imam derives his legitimacy directly not from God, but from the consensus (*ijma'*) of the community (*ummah*).

From the Isma'ili perspective, Imamate is a divine station, and the Imam is chosen and guided by God. (Moḥammad ibn Hasan al-Tusi, *Qawa'id al-'Aqa'id*, p. 84). Through his mediation, Muslims are able to fulfill their religious duties and attain a complete and comprehensive understanding of the apparent (*zahir*) and hidden (*batin*) dimensions of the Qur'an—the realization of which is fundamental to the fulfillment of divine ideals on earth. The Isma'ilis consider the *wilāyah* (authority/guardianship) of the Imam to be one of the pillars of religion, and they believe that Imamate is the highest of these pillars; (Moḥammad ibn Abd al-Karim al-Shustari, *al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, Vol. 1, pp. 227–228). They even regard it as the very essence of faith (*'ayn al-imān*). They maintain that Imamate continues eternally and that the universe cannot endure for a single moment without the existence of the Imam; should the Imam be lost, the entire world would instantly perish.

“We have narrated from Abu Ja'far Moḥammad ibn Ali (AS) that he said: ‘Islam is built upon seven pillars, the best of which is Wilāyah. Through it, and through the Wali (Guardian), one attains knowledge, purification, prayer, zakat, fasting, Hajj, and Jihad.’ These are the pillars of Islam, which we shall mention, God willing, after mentioning Faith (Iman), for which Allah does not accept any deed, nor does anyone prosper in His sight except those who are of its people.” (Nu'man ibn Moḥammad ibn Mansur al-Maghribi Ibn Hayyun, *Da'āim al-Islām*, Vol. 1, p. 2).

One of the fundamental creeds of the Isma'ilis is that after the passing of the Noble Prophet (pbuh), Ali (as) was chosen as Imam by divine command and by the explicit designation (*naṣṣ*) of the Prophet (pbuh) during his lifetime. Furthermore, Imamate must continue hereditarily through the progeny of Ali (as) and Fatima (as), and the succession of a subsequent Imam must be based on the designation (*naṣṣ*) of the preceding Imam. The Isma'ilis recognized Ismail as the Imam following the Imamate of Imam al-Ṣādiq (as). The Isma'ilis believe in seven Imams and are also known as the “Seveners” (*Sab'iyyah*). For them, the method of determining the Imam follows two paths: heredity and the stable designation (*nass*) of the Imam. In contrast, according to the Twelver Shi'a, all twelve Imams were introduced by the Prophet (pbuh) through Divine appointment, and each Imam introduced the subsequent Imam to his specific companions and



followers. Some Isma'ili groups recognize seven Imams other than the aforementioned seven. Another name for the Isma'ilis is the "Batinis." They believe that religious texts possess an apparent (*ẓāhir*) and a hidden (*bāṭin*) aspect, the latter of which is known only to the Imam. According to other Islamic sects, the Isma'ilis have practiced excess (*ifrāt*) in the esoteric interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of religion. (Murtada Mutahhari, *Kalam wa 'Irfan*, p. 21).

The Kaysaniyya was a Shi'a sect that, following the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn (as), recognized Moḥammad ibn al-Hanafiyya—another son of the Commander of the Faithful (as)—as the Imam. They held that the method of determining the Imam is through designation (*nass*) and maintained that a designation was issued regarding Moḥammad ibn al-Hanafiyya following the first three Imams. (Note: Sheikh al-Mufid has refuted their arguments. Moḥammad ibn Nu'man al-Mufid, *al-Fusul al-Mukhtara*, p. 300).

A group of the *Ahl al-Hadīth* and Sunni literalists, known as the Bakriyya, held the belief that there was a designation (*nass*) regarding the Imamate of Abu Bakr. (Abd al-Qahir al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*, pp. 212–213). Another sect, known as the 'Abbasiyya or Rawandiyya, held the belief that Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib had been designated as the successor to the Prophet (pbuh) through *nass*. (Ali ibn al-Husayn al-Murtada, *al-Shafi fi al-Imamah*, Vol. 2, p. 121).

Abu Hanifa believed that any man from the tribe of Quraysh who calls the people to the Book, the Sunnah, and the practice of justice, his Imamate is established; furthermore, it becomes obligatory for others to join him in "uprising" (*khuruj*). (Sa'd ibn Abd Allah al-Ash'ari, *al-Maqalat wa al-Firaq*, p. 8; Ali ibn al-Husayn al-Mas'udi, *Muruj al-Dhahab*, Vol. 3, p. 224). Regarding the Companions of the Prophet (pbuh), Abu Hanifa, in response to 'Ata ibn Abi Rabah, described himself as one of those who avoids the "cursing of the predecessors" (*sabb al-salaf*). (Sa'd ibn Abd Allah al-Ash'ari, *ibid.*; Ali ibn al-Husayn al-Mas'udi, *ibid.*).

The Mu'tazilites, Ash'arites, Maturidites, Salhiyya, Batriyya, the Zaydis, and the various Kharijite sects have all denied the existence of a divine designation (*nass*) regarding the Imamate. Instead, they view the determination of the Imam through the processes of *bay'ah* (allegiance) and election.

The Ash'arites consider the allegiance (*bay'ah*) of only one or two individuals to be sufficient. They argue this point by citing the *bay'ah* given to Abu Bakr by Umar, and to Uthman by Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf. (*ibid.*). The Mu'tazilites, however, require the allegiance of six individuals. Abu al-Hashim al-Jubba'i stated that if one person gives allegiance to a qualified

individual and four others express their consent, his Imamate is established. (ibid.).

The Hashawiyyah and the Sunni *Ahl al-Hadīth* literalists do not consider justice ('*adalah*) to be a prerequisite for the Imamate; they believe that if an individual seizes control through coercion and force (*qahr wa ghulba*), his Imamate is established, even if he is a tyrant (*ja'ir*). (ibid., Vol. 1, p. 199). Ahmad ibn Hanbal stated that obedience to the Imam is mandatory, even if he is a sinner (*tabah*). (Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Usul al-Sunnah*, p. 80). According to the majority of the *Ahl al-Hadīth*, an Imam is not removed from his position through the commission of injustice or immorality (*fisq*); rising up against him is not permissible. Rather, one must only offer him counsel (*nasiḥah*) and refuse to obey him in acts of disobedience to God. (Abu Bakr Moḥammad ibn Tayyib al-Baqillani, *Tamhid al-Awa'il*, p. 478).

A statement by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi regarding this matter is of significant importance. In discussing the authority of the Prophet (pbuh) and his role in the “perfection of the deficient” (*takmil al-naqiṣīn*), he writes:

“The Prophet is the founder of the Shari’ah and the guide toward the Truth. His relationship to his Companions is like that of the sun to the stars. Among the Companions, there is an individual whose proximity to the Prophet is greater than all others, and whose virtue is more abundant. Their relationship is like that of the moon to the sun; he is the Imam who serves as the deputy (*qā'im maqām*) of the Prophet and the one who clarifies his Shari’ah... As for the common people, they are like the temporal events of the universe in relation to the sun and the moon. There is no doubt that through them [the Imam/the luminaries], the deficient intellects are perfected and strengthened. Thus, this is a rational proposition derived through induction (*istiḡra'*) that yields certainty (*qat'* and *yaqīn*).” (Moḥammad Fakhr al-Razi, *al-Matalib al-'Aliyah*, Vol. 8, p. 63).

In contrast to the Twelver Shi'a position, which is based on the divine designation (*naṣṣ*) of the Ahl al-Bayt (as), there exist other theories such as the theories of *bay'ah* (allegiance) and *saltanah* (monarchy/sovereignty) as forms of the Succession of the Messenger of Allah. Since these fall outside the primary question and objective of this article—and since they have been extensively addressed and answered within the books of *Kalam* (theology)—we shall refrain from discussing them further.



The Perspective of Fakhr al-Razi

Under the exposition of the aforementioned verse, al-Razi addresses six points, the first of which we shall examine:

1. The Intended Meaning of the word Imām in the Verse

Regarding this, he states that scholars of deep investigation (*ahl al-tahqiq*) have argued that the intended meaning of “Imam” in this context is “Prophet,” and several evidences support this theory:

1. **The Universality of the Term:** God’s statement, “*making for the people an Imam*” [referring to Abraham (AS)], indicates that God appointed Abraham (as) as the Imam for all people. Anyone who is to be an Imam for all of humanity must be a Prophet appointed by God and possess an independent *Shari’ah* (divine law). If he were merely a follower of another Prophet, he would be a follower (*ma’mūm*) of that Prophet rather than an Imam; thus, the claim of “universality” would be invalidated.

2. **The Totality of Leadership:** The verse itself indicates that Abraham (as) is an Imam in all matters, and anyone who holds such a position must necessarily be a Prophet.

3. **The Hierarchy of Leadership:** Prophets are Imams in the sense that following them in character and conduct is obligatory (وجعلناهم أئمة يهدون — بأمرونا — “And We made them leaders guiding by Our command” [Al-Anbiya: 73]). Similarly, Caliphs are Imams because they occupy a position where following them is mandatory and their words and rulings must be accepted. Furthermore, jurists (*fuqaha*) and judges (*qudat*) are also referred to as Imams. Even one who leads a congregational prayer (*Imam al-Jama’ah*) is an Imam.

Thus, it is established that “Imam” is a title for anyone who possesses the merit of being worthy of being followed (*istihaq al-iqtida*) in matters of religion. Occasionally, the term “Imam” is even applied to a false or unjust leader, as in the verse: “*And We made them leaders [Imaman] inviting to the Fire*” [Al-Qasas: 41]. The distinction is that the term “Imam” is not used absolutely for a false leader; rather, it is used in a qualified (*muqayyad*) sense.

The Final Conclusion: Since Prophets occupy the highest rank of Imamate, the word “Imam” in this verse must be interpreted as “Prophethood” (*nubuwwah*). This is because God uses the term “Imam” here in a context of bestowal of favor (*imtinān*), and this favor must necessarily be among the greatest of favors to be consistent with the context of divine grace. Therefore, Imamate in this verse must be understood as Prophethood.

Al-Razi continues, noting that those who argue that no one can become an Imam except through divine designation (*naṣṣ*) have relied on this very



verse. They argue that the verse demonstrates that Abraham's (as) status as an Imam was established through explicit designation (*nass*), similar to the verse: "*Indeed, I will make in the earth a successive authority [Khalifah]*" [Baqarah: 30]. Consequently, they claim that the office of the Caliphate/Imamate can only be realized through *nass*.

Al-Razi's Rebuttal: Al-Razi states that this argument is weak. We have already established that the intended meaning of "Imam" here is "Prophethood." Even if we were to concede that the intended meaning is "Imamate" in its general sense, the verse merely indicates that *nass* is **one** way to achieve Imamate—this is not a point of contention. The actual dispute lies in whether Imamate can be established through means **other than** *nass*. This verse does not offer a definitive affirmation or negation regarding that specific issue. (Fakhr Razi, *al-Matalib al-'Aliyah*, Vol. 4, p. 34).

2. The Infallibility ('*Ismah*) of Abraham (as)

Continuing his analysis, he states: The phrase "*Indeed, I will make you an Imam for the people*" denotes that Abraham (as) was infallible (*ma'sum*) from all sins. This is because an Imam is, by definition, one who is to be followed (*iqtida*). If a sin were to be committed by him, it would necessitate following him in that sin; consequently, it would become obligatory for others to commit that sin as well. This is an impossibility (*muhāl*), for the very definition of a sin is that it is forbidden (*mamnu'*), whereas the definition of an obligation (*wajib*) is that its abandonment is forbidden. Both these premises cannot coexist in the same act. (Fakhr al-Razi, *al-Matālib al-'Aliyah*, Vol. 4, p. 36).

3. The Intended Meaning of the word "Covenant" ('*Ahd*)

Regarding what is meant by the word "Covenant" ('*ahd*) in the aforementioned verse, he cites four possibilities:

1. That the intended meaning of the covenant is the **Imamate** itself.
2. That the covenant refers to **Divine Mercy**.
3. That the covenant refers to **Obedience to God**.
4. That the covenant refers to **Security/Safety** (*aman*) granted by the Lord.

Ultimately, Fakhr al-Razi selects the first view as the most appropriate. (Fakhr al-Razi, *al-Matalib al-'Aliyah*, Vol. 4, p. 37).

4. The Fulfillment of Abraham's (as) Request Regarding Certain Descendants

Fakhr al-Razi notes that the verse indicates that God will grant the request made by Abraham (as) to certain of his offspring. If this were not the case, God's response to Abraham's prayer would have been a categorical "No" (*la*). Instead, God responded by stating that His covenant



“does not reach the wrongdoers” (*la yasilu 'ahdi al-zalimin*). This clearly demonstrates that those among the progeny of the Prophet who are *not* wrongdoers will indeed attain this station.

If an objection is raised—namely, “*Did Abraham (as) not already know that Prophethood is not worthy of wrongdoers?*”—the response is as follows: He did indeed know; however, the eventual state of his descendants was unknown to him. Thus, God clarifies for him that while some of his progeny will be wrongdoers, Prophethood will reach only those who are not.

5. Does Subsequent Sin/Transgression (*Fisq*) Nullify Imamate?

Regarding this, the majority of researchers and theologians (*mutakallimun*) have stated that it is not permissible for the Imamate to be established for a person who is currently a transgressor (*fāsiq*). However, there is a difference of opinion regarding whether a **subsequent** or **accidental** transgression (*fisq-i tāri'/ārid*)—meaning a sin committed after the Imamate has already been established—nullifies the Imamate.

The majority use this very verse (“*And when Abraham was tested by his Lord...*”) to prove that a *fāsiq* lacks the capacity (*salāhiyyah*) to hold the office of Imamate. Their reasoning is that every sinner is a “wrongdoer against oneself” (*zālim 'alā nafsihī*), and since the verse indicates that a person in a state of transgression/wrongdoing cannot hold the station of Imamate, it follows that the office and the sin are mutually exclusive.

6. The Indication of the Verse regarding the Infallibility of Prophets

Al-Razi posits that this verse provides evidence for the Infallibility of Prophets through two distinct logical paths:

1. The Path of A *Fortiori* Argument (*Qiyās al-Awlā*):

Since we have established that the intended meaning of “Covenant” (*'ahd*) in the verse is “Imamate,” and there is no doubt that every Prophet is an Imam (as an Imam is one to be emulated, and a Prophet is the most worthy of emulation for all people), it follows that if the verse proves an Imam cannot be a transgressor (*fāsiq*), then a *fortiori* (by even greater necessity), a Messenger cannot be a transgressor or a person of sin.

2. The Path of the Nature of the Covenant:

God states: “*My covenant does not reach the wrongdoers*” (*lā yanālu 'ahdī al-zālimīn*). If this “Covenant” refers to Prophethood (*nubuwwah*), then it is an absolute necessity that no wrongdoer can attain it. If the “Covenant” refers to Imamate, the same result holds; because every Prophet is an Imam, and any transgressor—who is by definition a wrongdoer against oneself—can never attain the station of Prophethood.



These points constitute the collection of arguments provided by Fakhr al-Razi in his *Tafsir* under the analysis of this verse (Fakhr al-Razi, 1420 AH, Vol. 4, pp. 32–41).

Conclusion

Based on the preceding analysis, the following conclusions are drawn:

First: The Nature of Appointment (*Naṣṣ*)

Imamate is a divine appointment (*naṣṣ ilāhī*); the selection of the Imam is not subject to human agency or communal choice. The role of the Prophet (pbuh) was not to appoint a leader via social contract, but to serve as the divine messenger tasked with introducing the divinely appointed Imams to the people.

Second: The Ontological Superiority of the Imam

The Imam possesses unique and incomparable attributes that distinguish him from all other human beings. These include: Divine Designation (*nass*), ontological connection to Divine Knowledge (*‘ilm ilāhī*), Infallibility (*‘ismah*), being the locus of the Divine Names (*mazhar al-asmā’ al-ilāhiyyah*), Divine Vicegerency (*khilāfah*), Wilāyah, and sacred lineage (*qarābah*). These attributes render the Imam incomparable to any other figure in human history.

Third: The Rational Necessity of Infallibility (*‘Ismah*)

If the requirement of Infallibility were removed from the station of Imamate—as suggested by certain views (such as the Hanbali or Zahiri positions) which argue that obedience must be rendered even to a transgressor—the logical consequences would be catastrophic for the Qur’anic text. Such a position would necessitate two impossible conclusions:

1. It would imply that God has commanded the mandatory obedience of the unjust, which contradicts the verse: “*Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you*” (Nisā: 59).

2. It would directly contradict the explicit divine declaration: “*...My covenant does not reach the wrongdoers*” (Baqarah: 124).

Therefore, Infallibility is not merely a merit, but a logical and textual necessity for the legitimacy of the Imamate.

Fourth: The Mechanism of Designation in Twelver Shi’ism

In Twelver Shi’i theology, Imamate is strictly *manṣūṣ* (designated). This designation is twofold: it is established through the explicit *naṣṣ* of the Prophet (pbuh) and through the *naṣṣ* of the preceding Imam regarding his successor.

Fifth: The Comprehensive Scope of Imamate

Imamate is a multi-dimensional leadership encompassing the material and spiritual, the physical and the metaphysical, and the exoteric (*ẓāhir*)



and the esoteric (*bāṭin*). The Imam is simultaneously the head of the state, the leader of society, the religious guide, the moral educator, and the inner spiritual mentor. He guides the worthy toward spiritual perfection through his metaphysical power, instructs the ignorant through his divine knowledge, and enforces the principles of justice through his executive authority.

Final Synthesis

Ultimately, the station of Imamate represents a rank that transcends these various dimensions; it is a station of such supreme height that it is even considered superior to the stations of Prophethood and Messengership (*nubuwwah* and *risālah*). This is the very station that Ibrahim (as) attained after undergoing exhaustive divine trials. It is this exalted rank that has been bestowed upon his chosen progeny, the foremost and most distinguished among whom is the Prophet Moḥammad (pbuh).

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