

Baqir al-Ulum Hadhrat Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (A.S.)

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The blessed name of the fifth Imam is Muhammad. His nickname is Baqir or Baqir al-'Ulum, as he split knowledge and uncovered the mysteries of sciences. Certain other nicknames have also been mentioned for him, each one of which indicating an attribute of that noble Imam, such as Shakir (grateful), Sabir (the one who patiently endures), and Hadi (guiding to the right)

Abu Ja'far was his patronymic. His mother was Fatimah daughter of Imam al-Hasan; therefore, his lineage from mother side traces back to Imam al-Hasan (as) and from his father's side to Imam al-Husayn (as). His father was Sayyid al-Sajidin, Imam Zayn al-Abidin (as).

Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as) was born on Friday, Safar 3, 57/December 16, 676 in Medina. In the tragic event of Karbala, he was in the company of his grandfather Imam al-Husayn (as), near the age of four.

His Imamate began in 95/714, upon the martyrdom of his father Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (as), and lasted until 114/733, that is, some months over nineteen years. During the Imamate of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as) and his son, Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (as), such events as the fall of Umayyad dynasty, seizure of power by the Abbasids, disruption of political disputes, the appearance of imposters and commanders like Abu Salma Khallal and Abu Muslim Khurasani, etc. took place; some books on philosophy were translated, and theological debates initiated; a number of Sufi Shaykhs, ascetics, and wandering dervishes affiliated to the ruling caliphate also came into being.

Judges and theologians were installed arbitrarily by formal officials and authorities to expound and interpret jurisprudence, ideology, theology, and ethics to the expediencies of the caliphate and the ruling centers, and to deviate the teachings of the Qur'an, especially the issue of Imamate and Wilayat which had after the tragedy of 'Ashura attracted the attention of many truth-seeking people toward the righteousness of the Household of 'Ali (as) and revealed the ugly-featured Umayyad tyrants and those who bartered their Hereafter with the worldly gains and also to throw the Prophet (S)'s traditions into oblivion.

Some had also forged traditions in favor of the ruling system or were busy forging some, or transforming them to the benefit of the tyrant usurpers of caliphate. These were really menacing factors which were to be withstood by the protectors and guardians of religion.

To this end, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as) and after him, Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (as) took advantage of the favorable political milieu to disseminate the true Islamic teachings and truthful knowledge and founded the Academy of Shi'ism and Islamic Sciences.

That was because these noble Imams and their disciples were in fact inheritors and the true guardians of the teachings of the Prophet (S) and the Islamic laws and justice; they were to train knowledgeable and practical disciples and competent and self-sacrificing companions, and to gather, compile, and teach the jurisprudence of Muhammad (S)'s progeny. That was why Imam al-Baqir (as) was always surrounded by scholars, scientists, and narrators of hadith, and famous orators and poets.

In his didactic school, knowledge and piety were taught to people. Abu Ja'far Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as) was the "custodian of alms" of the Prophet (S) and Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (as) and distributed those alms among Bani Hashim and the poor and the needy, and managed them financially. Imam al-Baqir (as) possessed praiseworthy features and was characterized by Islamic courteous behavior.

He was always well-dressed and would walk around with utmost dignity and grace. When he was asked why he put on costly garments while his ancestor would wear inexpensive clothes, he replied: "My ancestor's piety and governance demanded so in the times when the poor and the deprived were in great number. If I wore those clothes, I would not be able to enhance the religious rites in such a revolution of thought.

The fifth Imam (as) was very light-hearted and cheerful to the believers and friends. He would shake hands with all companions and encourage others to practice it, too. He would somehow mention in his talks that: "Shaking hands will eradicate internal indignations and will cause the sins of both sides to fall off as leaves of trees do in the fall.

Imam al-Baqir (as) was quite observant of giving away alms and donations and Islamic manners such as helping the needy, performing the funeral processions of the believers, visiting the patients, and respecting the courtesy and Islamic code of conducts and religious norms. He wanted to revive the traditions of his ancestor, the Apostle of Allah (S), among the

people and impart noble moral traits to them.

On hot days, he would go out to manage the farms and palm groves, and would help workers and farmers with plowing the land. Whatever he earned from the farm products – with his hardworking and labor – he would give away for Allah's sake.

Whenever he went to the mosque of his ancestor, the Apostle of Allah (S), to say prayers, people would gather around him to benefit from the bright rays of his knowledge and virtue. For twenty years Mu'awiya (in Sham) and his functionaries (in other Islamic lands) did their best by means of force, money, trickery, and hiring mercenary scholars to misrepresent the Islamic truths.

Therefore, after the tragic event of Karbala and the unprecedented oppressions by the children of Abu Sufyan, when people realized the righteousness of the Infallible Ahl al-Bayt (as), Imam al-Sajjad (as) and his noble son, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as), exerted great attempts in correcting people's beliefs, especially in Imamate and leadership, which only the Infallible Imams (as) deserved, and taught the true knowledge in different aspects to people.

As a result, the dissemination of the Islamic jurisprudence and ordinances became so widespread that Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (as), the honorable son of Imam al-Baqir (as), established a university with four thousand students and spread the Islamic traditions (hadiths) and doctrines all over the Muslim world of that time.

Imam al-Sajjad (as) had paved the way for this significant endeavor through invocations, supplications, and reminding the tyrannies of the Umayyad and by commanding good and forbidding evil. Similarly, Imam al-Baqir (as) further prepared the ground by holding teaching circles and clarifying the relevant religious problems for people.

Through his insight and in light of his divinely revealed intuition, the Holy Prophet (S) had determined the duties his progeny and Ahl al-Bayt would be holding as well as the role they were to play in identifying and introducing the true knowledge in the years to come, as the following hadith indicates: One day, Jabir b. 'Abd Allah Ansari, who had lost his eyesight late in his life, had an audience with Imam al-Sajjad (as). Hearing a child, he asked, "Who are you?" The child answered: "I am Muhammad b. 'Ali b. al-Husayn." Jabir called him near, took hold of his hand, kissed it, and said: "One day I had an audience with your grandfather, the Apostle of Allah (S). He told me: You may live so long as to see Muhammad b. 'Ali b. al-Husayn, one of my grandsons. Give my greetings to him and tell him: May Allah grants you the light of wisdom; disseminate the faith and knowledge!" Commanded by his grandfather, the fifth Imam embarked on a life-long dissemination of religious science and Islamic knowledge, as well as teaching the Qur'anic truths and Prophetic traditions.

Jabir b. 'Abd Allah Ansari is the one who on the arba'in (the fortieth day of Imam al-Husayn's martyrdom), the first year after the tragic event of Karbala, went there together with 'Atiyya, who was also one of the pious scholars and noble interpreters, made ghusl (major ablution) and while 'Atiyya was holding his hand, he sat down beside the holy grave of the master of martyrs, Sayyid al-Shuhada (as), and recited the ziyara of that Holy Imam.

Anyhow, Imam al-Baqir (as) was a source of radiant divine wisdom and a reservoir of divine ordinance. His celebrated name is on hundreds of traditions and wise sayings and exhortations which he had expressed to guide his talented and competent disciples and pupils, especially during his 13 years of Imamate. As it is related, in no other scholastic circles had the scholars been more humble and modest than the ones in the presence of Muhammad b. 'Ali (as).¹

In the time of Imam 'Ali (as), it was as though the status of science and value of knowledge was not – as it had to be – clear for the people yet. It seemed that the Muslims had not stepped out of the restricted material world; had not drunk from Imam 'Ali (as)'s transparent spring of knowledge; had remained thirsty at the infinite ocean of 'Ali (as)'s presence; and no one but a few had appreciated such precious jewel as him.

That was why the Master of the Faithful (as) had repeatedly said: "Ask me [questions] before you lose me!" And he would often say: "I am more familiar with the routes of the heaven than those of the earth." Alas! Nobody would appreciate his precious presence.

However, people gradually began to taste the pleasure and joy of the knowledge of Ahl al-Bayt (as) and the Islamic teachings, particularly in the time of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as); and like thirsty ones who had been deprived of fresh water or who had not appreciated it, they began to quench their thirst with the splendid and palatable divine knowledge of Imam al-Baqir (as) and gave in to his scholarly status. According to a historian, "At this point, the Muslims turned away from battle fields and warfare to conquering the doorways of knowledge and culture."

Since there was no possibility at the time for armed uprising – due to intense stranglehold and a lack of chivalrous combatants – Imam al-Baqir (as) deemed as more appropriate the dissemination of the Islamic knowledge and scholarly activities as well as ideological and

spiritual struggle against the Umayyad ruling system, and since a full course of Islamic law had not yet been instructed in details and comprehensively, he undertook the fruitful scholarly endeavors in this respect.

However, as the personality of the Imam (as) and the nature of his teachings – in different dimensions and directions – were considered detrimental to the ruling authorities, he was often persecuted and offended by them. Nonetheless, Imam al-Baqir (as) never neglected the importance of his dutiful role in starting a rebellion against the oppressive ruling system, but encouraged it in another way, i.e., by admiring and confirming his rebellious brother Zayd b. ‘Ali b. al-Husayn.

There are narrations denoting that Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as), who was the greatest intellectual and cultural pioneer of his time, had a significant role in promulgation of ethics, genuine Islamic philosophy, specific worldview of the Qur’an, training such disciples as Imam Shafi’i, and formulation of the Islamic school of thought. He is also said to have confirmed his brother Zayd’s revolutionary position; e.g., he is quoted as saying: “O Lord! Strengthen my back by [my brother] Zayd.

It is also said that one day Zayd paid a visit to Imam al-Baqir (as). On visiting Zayd, the Imam (as) recited the following verse: (O you who have faith! Be maintainers of justice and witnesses for the sake of Allah) (Al-Qur’an, 4: 135). He then continued: “O Zayd! By God you are an example of the one who acts according to this verse.”

It is known that Zayd, who under the instruction of his brother, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as), had undertaken an uprising to establish justice and faith, was finally ruthlessly murdered by the despotic ruling system of the Umayyad Hisham b. ‘Abd al-Malik in 120 (or 122)/737 (or 739), when he revolted against the latter during the Imamate of Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq (as). Zayd’s sacred body was held hanging from the gallows for years and then set on fire.

And as related in history, although Zayd’s movement ostensibly did not lead to victory and neither did other uprisings and endeavors in this period, these revolts and movements in the history of Shi’ism prompted awakening an activism; initiated the culture of martyrdom targeted against tyrannical rules; kept the pure blood of the Shi’a seething; and carried on the red line of martyrdom through the history of the Shi’a up to the present time.

Even though Imam al-Baqir (as) and Imam al-Sadiq (as) apparently did not involve in the above uprising for they did not regard the situation as appropriate, they attempted, at any chance they found, to correct the outlook for the society on the statehood and to teach and disseminate the Islamic principles and to illuminate people’s minds and thoughts, being in itself an alternative to battle and warfare against the enemy.

Since in this era the Umayyad rule was fading out and the ‘Abbasid rebellion was cracking down on them, the best circumstances had risen for promulgation of dynamic thoughts and training disciples and dignitaries as well as demarcating the right lines of statehood, which was indeed a political struggle laying the foundation for and formulation of the Islamic doctrine and principles.

However, as maintained above, wherever the caliphate system’s benefits were concerned and the rulers felt that the Imam (a.s.) was unveiling their cruel faces and teaching the right path to recognition of the “Infallible Imam” and Imamate which followed “Prophethood” and finally the “Rule of Allah”, they would proceed to persecute and even torture the Imam (as), and sometimes would exile and incarcerate him.

To give an example of the above, a historical event is narrated as follows: “One year when Hisham b. ‘Abd al-Malik, the Umayyad ruler, was going on a Hajj pilgrimage, Ja’far b. Muhammad, Imam al-Sadiq (as) together with his father, Imam al-Baqir (as) were also on the pilgrimage. One day, Imam al-Sadiq (as) was giving a speech in an assembly in Mecca, emphasizing the issue of leadership and that the Imams, rather than others, are the true leaders and caliphs of Allah on earth, and that following their footsteps and swearing allegiance to them rather than to others would bring forth social happiness and salvation.

These words, being uttered in the period of Hisham’s full power and during the Hajj rituals in Mecca, began to echo widely around and reached Hisham. In Mecca, Hisham did not dare to interfere, nor was it advisable for him to do so. But when he arrived in Damascus, he dispatched an envoy to Medina asking the governor there to send Imam al-Baqir (as) and his son to Damascus, which was done accordingly.

Imam al-Sadiq (as) said in this regard: “When we arrived in Damascus, Hisham called us to his court. When we entered, we saw him sitting on his throne and having his men fully armed, arrayed in two rows by his sides. He also had a target board installed before him on the other end of the hall, and the dignitaries among his entourage were engaged in an archery match.

As we entered the courtyard of Hisham’s palace, my father was in front and I was following

him. When we got near, Hisham asked my father: 'Why don't you take part in the match?' My father replied: 'I have become old and am not in a position to do this. It would be better if you exempt me from this.' Hisham swore: 'By God who honored us by His Religion and Messenger, I won't exempt you.' He then commanded one of the Umayyad nobles to hand his bow and arrow over to my father [Imam al-Baqir (as)] so that he too could take part in the match.

My father took the bow from the man, picked an arrow, put it in the bow, pulled the string powerfully, and shot it right to the center of the target. Then, he took another arrow and shot it at the notch of the previous one... numbering to nine successive shots. Infuriated by this event, Hisham said: 'You did a great job O Abu Ja'far! You are the most skilful among the Arab and non-Arab archers. Why did you say you were not able to do it? Tell me who taught you the archery?' My father replied: 'You know that this sport is common among Medinans. I used to practice it when I was young.'

Then, Imam al-Sadiq (as) pointed out that: "Hisham got mad with the whole affair and made up his mind to murder my father. At the same gathering, Hisham talked to Imam al-Baqir (as) over leadership and caliphate. Imam al-Baqir (as) expressed his opinion on the leadership of the faithful leaders and how an Islamic community is run and what characteristics a leader of an Islamic society must have.

All this further perplexed Hisham who lacked those requirements and who had usurped that position." It is reported by some that Imam al-Baqir (as) was incarcerated in Damascus. When Hisham got informed that the prisoners of Damascus have turned into Imam al-Baqir (as)'s disciples and followers, he freed the Imam and hastened to have him sent to Medina.

Before the Imam's departure, Hisham sent forth a courier to spread ill rumors against them (i.e., Imam al-Baqir and Imam al-Sadiq – A.S.) in the villages and towns en route, so that people would not get in touch with them and might not be influenced by their sermons and conducts. Nevertheless, on this journey the Imam did not spare any chance to contact people – even the Christians – and to make them aware of the whole situation.

It is interesting and instructive to know that in his last will, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as) enjoined his son Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (as) to allocate after his demise a part of his property to be spent during Hajj pilgrimage at mourning ceremonies for him for ten years in Mana, where Hajis gather for throwing stones at Satan and making sacrifices.

Drawing attention to the issue and determining the location is considered very important. According to the author of al-Ghadir – the well-known 'Allama Amini – the purpose of this testament is to make the great Islamic community acquainted with the true leader of the religion at that Holy Land and guide them to the right path, so that they would break away from others and join these leaders; and this is the utmost eagerness for guiding people and rescuing them from the claws of tyranny and misguidance.²

Martyrdom of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as)

Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as) lived on for 19 years and ten months after the martyrdom of his father, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (as). During this time he was engaged in doing his crucial duty of Imamate, spreading and propagating the Islamic culture, teaching disciples, leading companions and people, implementing traditions of his noble ancestor among the people, drawing the attention of the usurping ruling system toward the right line of leadership and guiding people in realizing the real leader and the Infallible Imam who is the genuine vicegerent (caliph) of Allah and His Apostle (S) on earth, and spared no moment in accomplishing his duties.

Finally, on Dhul Hijja 7, 114/January, 28, 733, when he was 57 years old, he was poisoned by the order of Hisham in Medina and departed to the Heavens. His sacred body was buried in Baqi' cemetery next to his honorable father.

His Wives and Children

The children of His Holiness are reported to be seven: Abu 'Abd Allah Ja'far b. Muhammad al-Sadiq (as) and 'Abd Allah who were born to Umm Farvah, daughter of Qasim b. Muhammad b. Abi Bakr. Ibrahim and 'Ubayd Allah, who were born to Umm Hakim and both died during the lifetime of their noble father. 'Ali, Zaynab, and Umm Salama, whose mother was an umm walad [a concubine].

Some Sayings of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as):

1. Islam is founded on five pillars: Prayers (Salat), alms tax (zakat), Hajj pilgrimage, fasting, and Wilayat (allegiance to the Imam). When asked about Wilayat, the Imam answered: by Wilayat the Muslims' affairs will be put into order and discipline.
2. Nothing is better liked by Allah than requesting Him and begging requirements from Him.
3. Nothing is better for fending off calamities and dire accidents than supplication.

4. The worst defect is to stare at others' faults and ignore one's own faults; to enjoin people to do things which one is unable to do oneself; and to persecute one's friend or companion who has no supporter and helper, and not to hasten to assist him.
5. When you are sitting in the presence of a scholar, be more eager to listen than to talk; learn to listen well as well as you learn to talk well, and do not interrupt the speaker.
6. The servants will not turn infidel if they do not state any ideas when having no knowledge, and do not deny what they have not understood.
7. A scholar whose knowledge is beneficent to people is superior to seventy thousand worshippers.
8. Whoever is not appointed as his own preacher by God, others' exhortation will not have any effect on him.

Notes:

1. Majmu'a-yi Zindigi-yi Chahardah Ma'sum 'Alayhim al-Salam, p. 175.
2. Imam dar 'Ayniyat-i Jami'a, from page 53 on (with slight changes).