

Continuation of Jihad by Knowledge

Name: Muhammad.

Agnomen: Abu Ja'far.

Title: Al-Bâqir.

Father: 'Ali ibn al-Husayn bin 'Ali.

Mother: Fâtimah daughter of Hasan bin 'Ali.

Birth: 1st Rajab, 57 AH in Medina.

Death: 7 Dhu 'l-Hijjah 114 AH in Medina.

1. Birth & Early Life

Imam Muhammad bin 'Ali's lineage is unique in the sense that he is the only Imam whose was connected to Fatimatu 'z-Zahrâ' through his father as well as his mother: his father was son of Imam Husayn bin 'Ali, and his mother was daughter of Imam Hasan bin 'Ali. Hence he was known as "Ibnu 'l-Khayaratayn — the son of two virtues". He was also known as "al-Bâqir — the digger [of the knowledge of the prophets]".

The first years of his life were blessed with the presence of his grandfather Imam Husayn bin 'Ali. He was four years old when the massacre of Karbala took place; and the childhood memories of that tragic event stayed with him forever. He witnessed the thirty-four years of his father's imâmate and his contribution in furthering the education of the Muslims in general and the Shi'as in particular.

2. Continuation of Jihâd by Knowledge

During the imamate of the fifth Imam, as a result of the injustice of the Umayyads, revolts and wars broke out in some parts of the Islamic world every day. Moreover, there were disputes within the Umayyad family itself which kept the government occupied and, to a certain extent, the Ahlu 'l-Bayt of the Prophet were left alone. From the other side, the tragedy of Karbala and the oppression suffered by the Ahlu 'l-Bayt, of which the fourth Imam was the most noteworthy embodiment, had attracted many Muslims to the Imams.

These factors combined to make it possible for people and especially the Shi'as to go in great numbers to Medina and to come into the presence of the fifth Imam. Possibilities for disseminating truth about Islam and the sciences of the Ahlu 'l-Bayt, which had never existed for the Imams before him, were presented to the fifth Imam. The proof of this fact is the innumerable traditions recounted from the fifth Imam and the large number of illustrious men of science and Shi'a scholars who were trained by him in different Islamic sciences. These names are listed in books of biographies of famous men in Islam.

'Abdullâh bin 'Atâ' al-Makki testifies that, "I have never seen students who are much older than their teacher in age as I have seen in the audience of Imam Muhammad bin 'Ali. Hakam bin 'Utayba, with all his reputation and prestige, used to sit at his pulpit like a child sitting in front of his tutor."

'Abdullâh, son of the second caliph 'Umar, was a highly respected scholar for the early Sunni Muslims. During the days of Imam Muhammad al-Bâqir (a.s.), someone asked 'Abdullâh a question which he was unable to answer. "Ask that young man," said 'Abdullâh pointing towards the Imam, "and also narrate to me his answer to your question." When the person came back to 'Abdullâh bin 'Umar with the answer, the latter said, "They belong to a family whose knowledge comes from God."

3. Some Distinguished Companions of the Imam

Abân bin Taghlib had the opportunity of seeking knowledge from the fourth, fifth and sixth Imams. He was an expert in commentary of the Qur'ân (tafsir) and hadith. Imam Muhammad al-Bâqir (a.s.) asked him to sit in Masjidu 'n-Nabi and give fatwa to the people "because I like to see people like you among my Shi'ahs."

Zurarah bin A'yan was a student of the fifth and sixth Imams. He is counted as one of the six most prominent companions of these two Imams. His greatest contribution is in spreading the ahâdîth of these two Imams among the Shi'ahs.

Kumayt Asadi was a very powerful poet of the later Umayyid period. He used his talents in the defence of Shi'ism and the Imams of Ahlu 'l-Bayt, and against the rulers of the Umayyads. He was always on the "most wanted" list of the rulers.

Once during hajj, Kumayt recited poems for Imam Muhammad al-Bâqir (a.s.). The Imam become so pleased that he raised ten thousand dirhams from the Banu Hashim family to reward Kumayt. Kumayt refused to accept the money, saying: "By God! I did not say the poem for this money; if you must reward me, then please give me one of your own shirts." He wanted to have that shirt with him in the grave for intercession in the hereafter.

Muhammad bin Muslim, an expert in Shi'a laws, was a prominent student of both the fifth and the sixth Imam. He was a resident of Kufa, but went to Medina and stayed for four years studying with the Imams. Once 'Abdullâh bin Abi Ya'fûr asked Imam as-Sâdiq (a.s.), "Sometimes I have questions which I cannot answer and I cannot reach you at all times. What should I do?" The Imam said, "Why do not you ask Muhammad bin Muslim?"

4. Attitude of the Rulers

The Umayyid rulers during the imamate of Imam Muhammad al-Bâqir (a.s.) were the following: 1. Walîd bin 'Abdu 'l-Malik; 2. Sulaymân bin 'Abdu 'l-Malik; 3. 'Umar ibn 'Abdu 'l-'Azîz; 4. Yazîd bin 'Abdu 'l-Malik; 5. Hishâm bin 'Abdu 'l-Malik.

With the exception of 'Umar ibn 'Abdu 'l-'Azîz, all the rulers were as cruel and corrupt as their predecessors. Walîd appointed people (like Hajjâj bin Yusûf ath-Thaqafi) to the various positions in the Muslim empire who had no regard for Islamic values and were guilty of torturing and oppressing those who did not accept their views. Sulaymân was comparatively less of a tyrant not out of kindness and a sense of responsibility but because he was deeply absorbed in the pleasures and excessively luxurious lifestyle at the expense of the public treasury!

'Umar ibn 'Abdu 'l-'Azîz's short reign of two years was the best period in the Umayyid history. He tried to establish justice and equality, and put an end to quite a few abhorrent practices started by Mu'âwiyah: e.g., the practice of cursing Amîru 'l-Mu'minîn 'Ali bin Abi Tâlib (a.s.) in the Friday khutbas.

Then Yazîd bin 'Abdu 'l-Malik came to power who is considered to be morally the most corrupt of all the Umayyad rulers. He was obsessed with music and dance, and would invite musicians and dancers from all over to his court in Damascus and reward them heftily. It was during his reign that pleasure pursuit, chess, playing cards and other such games became common ways of entertainment among the Arabs.

Hishâm bin 'Abdu 'l-Malik was a mean and cruel person. He was insecure about his own position among the people, and was very jealous of the popularity and respect accorded by the people to the descendants of Imam 'Ali (a.s.). It was during his reign that Zayd bin 'Ali (son of the fourth Imam) started an uprising against the Umayyads which, unfortunately, ended in defeat in which Zayd was killed very cruelly.

5. Final Days & Death

During one of the hajj rituals, the Imam gave a speech exhorting the rights of his family and himself. This was reported to Hishâm who was also in Mecca at that time. On his return to Syria, Hishâm ordered Imam Muhammad al-Bâqir (a.s.) and his son, Ja'far, to be brought to Damascus. Hishâm tried to intimidate and humiliate the Imam but did not succeed. After some time, he was forced to let the holy Imam go back to Medina where he was always under surveillance by the regime's spies and informers. Finally, in the year 114 A.H., the Imam was poisoned by the Umayyad agents and died on 7th Dhu 'l-Hijja, and was buried beside his father in the Jannatu 'l-Baqi' graveyard.