

Imam Muhammad al-Baqer (AS), the Preserver of Azadari

By: Seyyed Ali Shahbaz

“The height of perfection is excellence in the understanding of the religion, endurance in hardships and administration of the affairs of life according to one’s means, in the right measure.”

The above-mentioned bezels of wisdom are not the words of any ordinary scholar, trying to acquire some grains of knowledge after trial and error. These are in fact guidelines for preservation of the essence of the dynamic code of life, called Islam, in all matters, without letting distortion to creep in, as one strives for perfection in the various spheres of life.

The one who expressed these wise words was the most knowledgeable person of his age, to the extent that he was called Splitter and Spreader of Sciences (Baqer al-Uloum).

He was among the select group to whom God refers in the holy Qur’an as “Rasekhouna fi ilm” or Repositories of Knowledge. It means whatever wisdom he possessed was God-given for the guidance of human societies.

For those still in doubt about his identity, these initial days of the month of Safar ought to be an indicator, in view of the events related to him and his family.

For example, on the 1st of Safar in the year 61 AH, as a mere boy of 4 years, he was among the innocent rope-bound prisoners who were dragged to the court of a Godless ruler in Damascus, along with the severed heads of the male members of his household.

If the 3rd of Safar (according to a narration) is to be considered his birthday in Medina in 57 AH, the 2nd of Safar was the exact date his brother (Zayd) was martyred in battle near Kufa in 121 AH – seven years after his own martyrdom through poisoning in his hometown in 114 AH.

He was the namesake of Prophet Muhammad (SAWA); was descended on both sides (paternal and maternal) from the Messenger of Mercy; and was the recipient of a unique greeting from God’s Last Emissary to mankind – entrusted to Jaber ibn Abdullah al-Ansari some five decades before his birth.

Moreover, he was the father of the person who revived in society the pristine “Sunnah” and “Seerah” (behaviour and practice) of the Prophet that has come to be known as the Ja’fari School of Jurisprudence.

To be more precise, he was Imam Muhammad al-Baqer (AS), the 5th divinely-decreed successor of the Seal of Prophets, on whose authority, various scholars, not just of the School of the Ahl al-Bayt but also from among the fresh converts to Islam – such as Abu Hanifa of Iranian Zoroastrian stock from Kabul – recorded Islamic history and laws, which until then had been banned from being penned down by the successive regimes.

Time and space do not permit me to detail his firm censuring of Abu Hanifa for distorting jurisprudential rulings on the flimsy base of “qiyas” (analogy or guesswork), or the Omayyad caliph, Omar Ibn Abdul-Aziz’s lifting of the ban around 100 AH on the recording of hadith that was imposed by Omar Ibn Khattab almost nine decades ago – in order to prevent Muslims from putting on paper the Prophet’s eloquent elucidation of the God-given merits and prime position of the One and Only Commander of the Faithful, Imam Ali Ibn Abi Taleb (AS).

Since we are passing through the equally tragic aftermath of the tragedy of Karbala, it should be pointed out that the 5th Imam kept alive his father Imam Zain al-Abedin’s (AS) and his great aunt, Hazrat Zainab’s (SA) tradition of the correct manner of commemorating the heartrending martyrdom of his grandfather, Imam Husain (AS), in order to ensure that other than what the Infallible Imams have taught, unrealistic and unnatural additions are nothing but distortion of the universal message of Ashura for all humanity.

In these mourning ceremonies (Majalis al-Aza), along with the expounding of the tenets of Islam and explanation of the God-given merits of the Ahl al-Bayt, the bloodcurdling events of Ashura and its aftermath were recounted by preachers to the weeping audience. Such gatherings would also see poets recite elegies to instill the sense of justice and resistance against tyranny among the believers, who with tears streaming down their eyes used to beat their chests (often rhythmically) with bare hands as natural expression of grief (and not with instruments to willfully injure themselves).

Among the famous poets of the days of Imam Baqer (AS) was Kumayt al-Assadi who wrote the epic lengthy ode titled “al-Hashemiyat” in praise of the Ahl al-Bayt, and as a result was imprisoned by the Omayyad regime.

The 5th Imam also specified in his last will that mourning ceremonies be held every year at

the plain of Mena near Mecca during the annual Hajj so that pilgrims from different parts of the Islamic world (most of them neo Muslims) will be acquainted with the sufferings of the Ahl al-Bayt for the sake of Islam and for safe-guarding of the pure and pristine teachings of their ancestor, Prophet Muhammad (SAWA). He even set aside a sum of money to ensure that such gatherings could be held without interruption for at least a decade after his death. During his 19-year imamate that saw at least five Omayyad caliphs rise and fall, the Prophet's righteous successor left no stone unturned to enlighten the Ummah by grooming dedicated disciples, who would rise to great heights under his son and successor, Imam Ja'far as-Sadeq (AS), in whose famous academy of Medina, 4000 scholars used to learn different branches of science – including the Father of Chemistry, Jaber ibn Hayyan (Gebr to Medieval Europe).

Imam Muhammad al-Baqer (AS) stressed the importance of the famous Ziyarat-e Ashura, to his Alqama al-Hadhrami, saying: “With face turned towards the shrine of Imam Husain (AS), first send salaams upon him and imprecate (la'n) his killers. Then after performing a two-rak'at prayer, recite it.

\"O Alqama! If you recite this Ziyarat in this manner, it is as if you have performed the pilgrimage of Imam Husain (AS) in the manner of angels, and Allah will write for you thousands and thousands of rewards and forgive your thousands and thousands of sins. The one who recites this Ziyarat will be exalted by 100,000 degrees while his reward would be equal to those martyred along with Imam Husain (AS), to the extent that he will share the rewards of the martyrs (of Karbala) and will be recognized as from among them. His rewards will also equal the rewards of pilgrimages performed by every Prophet and Apostle since the martyrdom of Imam Husain (AS) till this day. Alqama, if possible, perform the pilgrimage of Imam Husain (AS) every day by (recitation of) this Ziyarat.\"