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Imāmate (Legitimate Leadership)

And (remember) when his Lord tried Ibrāhīm [Abraham] with [His] commands, and he fulfilled them, He said: "Lo! I have appointed you a leader (*imām*) for mankind." [Ibrāhīm] said: "And of my offspring?" He said: "My covenant does not include wrongdoers." (Q2:124)

And We bestowed upon him Isḥāq (Isaac) and Yaʿqūb (Jacob) as a grandson. Each of them We made righteous. And We made them leaders (*imām*s) who guide by Our command, and We inspired in them the doing of good deeds and the right establishment of worship and the giving of alms, and they were worshippers of Us. (Q21:72–73)

Every Shīʿī group holds that ʿAlī was the legitimate successor to the Prophet based on either a formal or an informal designation. According to the Shīʿa, ʿAlī was not merely the rightful political head of the community but also wielded spiritual authority. He was an Imām as conceived of in the Qurʾānic verses that open this chapter, guaranteeing that the community would not be led astray and providing divinely inspired leadership. As mentioned in Chapter 1, rational divine justice supplies both a knowledge-centered and a politically centered justification for the necessity of the Imāmate. In the postprophetic era (Muḥammad being the last prophet), Imāms are designated by God to guide the Muslim community as both interpreters/preservers of revelation and political leaders.[1] Although the Imām is the singular representative of legitimate authority, the nature of this authority (political versus religious) is contested among the different Shīʿī communities.

This chapter focuses on various aspects of the institution of the Imāmate, arguably the most distinctive element of Shīʿism. The organization of the chapter is thematic. The first section focuses on the spiritual

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[1] It is worth reiterating that for the Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers, the Imām also plays a seminal cosmological role. The importance of cosmology for the Twelvers during the occultation of the Twelfth Imām is discussed in Chapters 4 and 7.

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dimensions of the Imāmate that are common to nearly every major Shī'ī group. Specifically, it explores the concept of *walāya*, a notoriously difficult word to translate but one that broadly connotes the charismatic bond between the Shī'a and the *ahl al-bayt* (lit. people of the house, but often simply referred to as the family of the Prophet).[2] The second section examines the political dimensions of the Imāmate, such as the qualifications of an Imām and the scope of his authority. These issues are a primary means of differentiating between Shī'ī groups.

I. THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS

The historical basis for the Shī'ī institution of the Imāmate stems from a belief in the special qualities and role of 'Alī. A number of Muslims claimed a distinctive charismatic bond (*walāya*) with 'Alī during his lifetime that transcended simple loyalty or political support. In time, this veneration grew to include 'Alī's larger household and (eventually) a select number of his lineal descendants. As the heirs of the charismatic mantle of both 'Alī and the Prophet, these descendants became focal points for both Shī'ī political aspirations and popular piety.

A. Walāya *(Charismatic Loyalty)*

During the mid and late seventh century, the Muslim empire rapidly expanded from a small section of the Arabian Peninsula to an area that stretched from Central Asia in the east to North Africa in the west. This expansion was accompanied by extreme social unrest. The order established by the Prophet (d. 632) and strengthened by the second caliph 'Umar (r. 634–44) favored those Muslims who had converted early in the history of Islam. These "early-comers" were said to possess *sabiqa* (precedence) and were awarded important posts (e.g., governorships) and a higher percentage of the spoils of conquest. In many instances, this system disempowered established tribal elites whose authority drew primarily on their lineage.[3] The twelve year reign of the third caliph 'Uthmān (r. 644–56) saw the

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[2] This is a rather loose translation that reflects the general meaning of the term for most of the Shī'a. The literal meaning of *walāya* is "support," but such a translation fails to convey its functional implications for the relationship between the Shī'a and the family of the Prophet. The related term *wilāya* is often used to denote the exercise of political and religious authority. There is a tendency to utilize the two words interchangeably, but this is misleading. The first (*walāya*) speaks more to the bond the Shī'a feel with their Imāms, whereas the second (*wilāya*) refers primarily to the actual exercise of authority by the Imāms. Both terms are closely related to the word "*walī*" (discussed later), which can denote both the object of support and the bearer of authority.

[3] There were, of course, tribal elites who had converted early (e.g., the third caliph 'Uthmān) and possessed both *sabiqa* and a noble lineage.

restoring of these elites to positions of power at the cost of the early-comers. This period also witnessed a growth in the number of non-Arab Muslims, many of whom felt marginalized and were subject to various discriminatory policies. The resulting tensions culminated in the killing of 'Uthmān at the hands of a group of Egyptian (and Kufan) early-comers and the election of 'Alī (r. 656–61) as the fourth caliph.

The years of 'Alī's rule were marked by unrest and civil strife as competing interest groups jockeyed for power. Early converts to Islam from the tribe of the Prophet (i.e., Quraysh) contested 'Alī's election at the Battle of the Camel in 656. 'Alī's opponents in the battle included Ṭalḥa b. 'Ubayd Allāh and al-Zubayr b. al-'Awwām (two important Companions) along with 'Ā'isha bt. Abī Bakr (one of the Prophet's widows and daughter of the first caliph). This was followed by a protracted conflict with Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān (d. 680), the long-standing Muslim governor in Syria, who favored the reestablishment of a social order led by the tribal elites. 'Alī's inability to depose Mu'āwiya fragmented his own support and produced a faction (i.e., the Kharijites) of early-comers that declared both 'Alī and Mu'āwiya apostates. In 661, a Kharijite assassinated 'Alī in the city of Kufa in southern Iraq. Over the next two decades, Mu'āwiya consolidated power and laid the foundation for a dynasty (the Umayyad dynasty) that remained in power until 750 with the backing of the Arab tribal elite.

This historical sketch highlights the major social divisions in the Muslim world during the early Islamic period.[4] Terms such as "early-comer" and "tribal elite" roughly approximate interest groups that vied for political power. The early-comers were interested in the restoration of their rights and championed a social order based on Islamic credentials (e.g., early conversion). They felt that 'Alī represented the best hope for this project, and they thus provided the core of his political and military support. They were joined by non-Arab converts who gathered in Kufa and put forward a universalist vision of Islam that accorded them full rights as part of a larger Muslim community. It is no surprise that 'Alī's capital during his brief caliphal reign was not Mecca or Medina in Arabia (strongholds of tribal elites and Quraysh) but rather Kufa (a garrison city in Mesopotamia with a significant early-comer and non-Arab Muslim population). This is not to say that 'Alī completely lacked supporters from other backgrounds, but the bulk of his support came from these two social groups.[5]

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[4] For this historical narrative of the early period, see Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. 1 241–79, and Hinds, *Studies*, 1–55.

[5] Note that the Kharijite withdrawal from 'Alī's supporters resulted partly from his failure to remove Mu'āwiya from power. The Kharijites were unwilling to entertain the possibility of a compromise that left the tribal elites in power.

The roots of the Shī'a trace back to these early groups that brought 'Alī to power and then fought for him during his short caliphal reign. Recent scholarship has emphasized the particular charisma 'Alī seemed to exercise with certain elements of his followers.[6] Given the lack of primary sources from the time, it is difficult to discern the basis of this charisma. Perhaps it derived from his actions as caliph (a restoration of early-comer rights) or his idealistic unwillingness to negotiate with his enemies. Regardless of the origins of his charisma, 'Alī won supporters whose loyalty acquired a deeper significance that included a spiritual belief in his exclusive legitimate religious and political authority (*walāya*).[7] It was this belief that distinguished those who backed 'Alī for political reasons from those who eventually became the Shī'a. In other words, the Shī'a were those who felt "an all-encompassing bond of spiritual loyalty" toward 'Alī that transcended politics and self-interest.[8] These bonds were critically reinforced near the end of 'Alī's life when a large contingent of his followers took an oath (*bay'a*) in which they agreed to obey his commands without question.[9]

'Alī's status as the object of the charismatic loyalty (*walāya*) of the Shī'a was legitimized through an episode that occurred near the end of the Prophet's life.[10] During his final pilgrimage in 632, Muḥammad made a speech at a location between Mecca and Medina known as Ghadīr Khumm, where he declared, "Of whomever I am the master (*mawlā*), 'Alī is his master (*mawlā*)."[11] The Shī'a interpreted this statement as both (i) a formal appointment of 'Alī as the Prophet's political successor and (ii) a symbolic transfer of spiritual authority from the Prophet to 'Alī. The latter function was particularly important because it legitimized the notion of *walāya* (derived from the same linguistic root as *mawlā*) through Muḥammad, the sole conduit for divine revelation. In subsequent centuries, the Shī'a would refer to 'Alī as *walī Allāh*, thereby linking his spiritual authority directly to God. Building on an early understanding of the term, the Shī'a also emphasized that *walāya* was not restricted to one historical personality

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[6] The discussion of *walāya* that follows draws heavily on Dakake, *Charismatic*, 1–69.

[7] An individual who exercises political authority on behalf of a superior power (e.g., God) is called a *walī*, whereas an individual who holds spiritual authority is often referred to as a *walī* of God (*walī Allāh*). See also note 2.

[8] Dakake, *Charismatic*, 7.

[9] This oath – the second of its kind – is often considered the actual starting point of Shī'ism. For more, see Dakake, *Charismatic*, 60–63.

[10] For this episode and its connection to *walāya*, see Dakake, *Charismatic*, 33–48. For a Shī'ī (Twelver) interpretation of Ghadīr Khumm, see Sobhani, *Doctrines*, 104–108.

[11] The term *mawlā* (derived from the same root as *walāya* and *wilāya*) has a number of potentially contradictory meanings from patron/client to master/servant. The Shī'a associate the word with *walī*. See notes 2 and 7.

(i.e., ʿAlī) but was transferable from one generation to the next. This view of *walāya* became an integral part of the Shīʿī creed and arguably the primary lens through which the community viewed its relationship with the Imāms. The events at Ghadīr Khumm are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

B. The Family of the Prophet (Ahl al-Bayt)

There was no reason to believe that the early Shīʿa would transfer their allegiance to a new leader after Alī's death. Even those Shīʿa who supported the political claims of Ḥasan (ʿAlī's eldest son) appeared primarily motivated by their devotion to ʿAlī. Over time, however, the distinctive charismatic bond between the Shīʿa and ʿAlī developed into a more general veneration of the family of the Prophet. This is reflected in Qurʾānic verses and Prophetic traditions that the Shīʿa interpret as evidence for their special status.

The most important of these Qurʾānic passages is Q33:33, which reads:

> And stay in your houses and do not display your finery like the displaying of the Time of Ignorance. Be regular in prayer, and pay the poor-due, and obey God and His messenger. God's wish is but to remove uncleanness far from you, O People of the House (*ahl al-bayt*), and cleanse you with a thorough cleansing. (Q33:33)

The outward meaning of the verse is clear: it emphasizes the elevated standing of the "People of the House" and states that God has bestowed a spiritual purity on them. But who are the "People of the House?" Many Sunnī scholars note that the previous verse addresses the Prophet's wives and suggest a broad definition of the term that includes his extended family. Shīʿī commentators counter by citing Sunnī traditions in which the Prophet interprets the term narrowly as referring to the family of ʿAlī and Fāṭima (including the Prophet). They also offer grammatical arguments that use pronoun changes (from the feminine plural [*kunna*] to the masculine plural [*kum*]) to establish that the passage refers not to the Prophet's wives but to his specific household.

Another verse often mentioned by Shīʿī scholars is Q3:61, which recounts an incident known as the Mubāhala (mutual cursing). According to Muslim commentators, the verse was revealed before a confrontation in which the Prophet challenged the Christians of the Arabian town of Najrān to pray and invoke God's punishment on whichever side was mistaken regarding the role and status of Jesus. The verse states:

> And whoever disputes with you concerning Him, after the knowledge which has come unto you, say, "Come! We will summon our sons and your sons, and

our women and your women, and ourselves and yourselves, then we will pray humbly and invoke the curse of God upon those who lie." (Q3:61)

The majority view in the Muslim exegetical tradition is that the Prophet brought ʿAlī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn as representations of his "self," his "sons," and his "women." When the Christians saw this, they backed out of the mutual cursing and agreed to peace terms. The Shīʿa interpret this incident as evidence that Muḥammad's conception of his family was limited to the household of ʿAlī. This is not, however, clear from the text of the verse itself. The same ambiguity is found in other Qurʾānic verses that speak of "purified" or "guided" individuals, whom the Shīʿa invariably equate with the family of the Prophet.

The strongest evidence in favor of the distinguished status of the family of the Prophet is drawn from Prophetic traditions recorded in both Shīʿī and Sunnī sources.[12] Perhaps the most prominent of these is known as the tradition of *al-thaqalayn* (lit. the tradition of the two safeguards) and dated (like the tradition of Ghadīr Khumm) to the Prophet's final pilgrimage. The text reads (in many variants):

> I am leaving you with two safeguards (lit. weighty things), the Book of God and the members of my household (*ahl al-bayt*). As long as you cling to these two, you will not go astray.

For the Shīʿa, this tradition clearly establishes a parallel between the Prophet's family and the Qurʾān itself. Many Shīʿī scholars (especially Ismāʿīlīs and Twelvers) go even further by considering the family of the Prophet the living embodiment of the Qurʾān and the key to its interpretation. It should be noted that there are variants of this tradition in the Sunnī sources that challenge Shīʿī claims by replacing the phrase "my family" with "my practice (*sunna*)."

A direct affirmation of the importance (and identity) of the family is also found in the tradition of *al-kisāʾ* (lit. the tradition of the cloak). The text of the tradition is too long to quote in detail, but it involves an incident in which the Prophet gathered ʿAlī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn under his cloak. He identified them as the members of his household (*ahl al-bayt*) and then prayed to God for their well-being and support. The account proceeds to describe the angel Jibrāʾīl (Gabriel) asking the Prophet's permission to join them under the cloak and a conversation in which the Prophet praises

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[12] For a standard Shīʿī (Twelver) interpretation of the traditions that follow, see Sobhani, *Doctrines*, 101–104.

the (future) Shīʿa.[13] This tradition highlights the family's importance but also narrows its scope to these five figures who are often referred to as "the people of the cloak" (*ahl al-kisāʾ*).

Other traditions focus on the spiritual dimensions of the Prophet's family in more general terms. In one instance, the family is compared to Nūḥ's (Noah's) Ark with the claim that "whoever takes refuge therein is saved and whoever opposes it is drowned." A similar ethos permeates traditions in which the family is described in celestial terms. A tradition notes that "as the stars in the sky are the source of guidance to the travelers, the *ahl al-bayt* are the source of guidance for the people."[14] A variant of this report states that "just as the stars are a means of securing the people of the earth against drowning, my *ahl al-bayt* are a means of securing my community from division." Salvation and proper guidance are thus linked directly to the family of the Prophet as opposed to other potential sources of authority.

The veneration of the family has a special place in the devotional practices of the Twelver Shīʿa. The family's charisma is extended through a fixed line of ʿAlī's descendants and persists even after their deaths (see Table 4.1). Their graves are focal points of piety, with every Twelver enjoined to visit them as a demonstration of love and fidelity. Such pilgrimages were important components of Twelver identity as early as the eighth century and continue to this day. Destinations of choice include the shrines of ʿAlī in Najaf (Iraq), Ḥusayn in Karbala (Iraq), and ʿAlī al-Riḍā, the eighth Twelver Imām, in Mashhad (Iran). A number of other important historical figures are also accorded the honor of pilgrimage, most prominently Zaynab, the sister of Ḥusayn, whose tomb is located in Syria. The Zaydīs, by contrast, extend the spiritual charisma of the *ahl al-bayt* to all descendants of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, whereas most Ismāʿīlīs restrict it to the reigning Imām.

This shift from a general veneration of the Prophet's family to a belief in their exclusive political and religious authority is particular to the Shīʿa. Sunnī scholars acknowledge the importance of the *ahl al-bayt* and transmit most of the traditions described thus far in this chapter. Many even share Shīʿī interpretations of ambiguous Qurʾānic verses. Popular Sunnī devotional practices also accord the Prophet's family (and descendants) a particular reverence. Sunnī scholars do not, however, ascribe to them

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[13] Interestingly, the Sunnī sources contain a version of this tradition that includes the revelation of Q33:33. In that account, the Prophet explains to Jibrāʾīl (the bearer of revelation) that the term *ahl al-bayt* specifically refers to the "people of the cloak."

[14] There are parallel Sunnī versions of this tradition in which the Companions replace the *ahl al-bayt* in the role of guiding stars.

a singular, divinely inspired right to the leadership of the entire Muslim community. In other words, Sunnī scholars honor the family of the Prophet but place them on a par with other figures from early Islam, namely the entire generation of the Prophet's Companions.[15] The Shī'a, by contrast, revere specific Companions but view the family as the exclusive heirs to the Prophet's authority.

II. THE POLITICAL AND KNOWLEDGE DIMENSIONS

The Shī'ī belief in the authority of the family of the Prophet is institutionalized in the office of the Imāmate. The previous section examined the spiritual aspects of the Imām. He is the sole conduit for proper religious guidance and fosters a bond of charismatic loyalty (*walāya*) with his Shī'a. This section turns to the political facets of the Imāmate, addressing a number of difficult questions. Which members of the family of the Prophet are eligible to be Imāms? What is the nature and scope of the Imām's authority? The answers to these and related questions determine the primary boundaries between Zaydī, Ismā'īlī, and Twelver Shī'ism.

A. Requirements and Scope

The first area of disagreement among the Shī'a concerns the lineal requirements for the Imāmate. In the seventh century, many Shī'a opened the office to all of 'Alī's descendants or favored a broad interpretation that included the Prophet's uncles.[16] The most important of these expansive groups was the Kaysānī Shī'a, who traced the Imāmate through the line of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya (d. 700), 'Alī's third-eldest son and the product of a union with a woman from the tribe of the Banū Ḥanīfa. It is difficult to discern the numerical significance of the Kaysānīs in the early period, but their influence is unquestionable. The leadership of the group purportedly passed to the 'Abbāsids (descendants of the Prophet's uncle 'Abbās) after Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya's son Abū Hāshim died childless. The Kaysānīs then provided the organizational structure that helped the 'Abbāsids overthrow the Umayyad dynasty in 750. By the late eighth century, the group began to fade as the 'Abbāsids turned away

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[15] Note that many Sunnīs place Ḥasan and Ḥusayn in a list with ten other Companions whom the Prophet reportedly promised paradise.

[16] A segment of the Zaydī Shī'a that survived into the tenth century extended the Imāmate to include the descendants of 'Alī's father (Abū Ṭālib). This was a minority position that does not survive in the modern period.

from their Shīʿī roots and many Kaysānīs were incorporated into other streams of Shīʿism. Most Shīʿī groups (including the three at the heart of the present study) held to far more restrictive lineal requirements for the Imāmate.

The second area of disagreement among the Shīʿa centers on the nature and scope of the Imām's authority. As noted in Chapter 1, the Zaydīs differ from the Ismāʿīlīs and Twelvers in their central justification for the office of the Imām. Specifically, they affirm the politically centered argument that highlights the Imām's duty to enjoin good and forbid wrong. The Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers are more (although not exclusively) partial to the knowledge-centered argument that emphasizes the Imām's function of interpreting revelation in a postprophetic world. These contrasting positions produce dramatically divergent views of the Imāmate, influencing both the procedure for identifying the Imām and the scope of his authority.

B. The Imāmate of the Zaydī Shīʿa

The Zaydīs restrict the Imāmate to the lineal descendants of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn (the sons of ʿAlī and Fāṭima). The first three Imāms (ʿAlī, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn) are accorded a special status because of their designation to the office.[17] The Zaydīs argue that after the death of Ḥusayn in 680, the Imāmate became the collective trust of the descendants of the Ḥasanid and Ḥusaynid lines. These lineages provided a pool of potential candidates, but to become an Imām, a contender had to meet a number of additional conditions.

The Zaydī view of the Imāmate is one that focuses on the activist implications of the principle of enjoining good and forbidding wrong. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this idea draws from the theological belief in rational divine justice to argue that the Imām must fight tyranny and establish a just political order. Such an understanding of the Imāmate, however, does not preclude all scholarly or moral criteria. On the contrary, Zaydī sources emphasize that an Imām must possess the ability to deduce legal rulings through the process of *ijtihād* (reasoning applied to the revealed texts). This scholarly endeavor is necessary to demonstrate that an Imām has the intellectual qualifications for erecting a just state governed by the

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[17] There are two Zaydī views as to the means of this designation. The first holds that the Prophet identified ʿAlī, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn as the first three Imāms. The second asserts that each was appointed by his predecessor: ʿAlī by the Prophet, Ḥasan by ʿAlī, and Ḥusayn by Ḥasan. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 5.

principles of Islamic law. The Imām must also be an upright member of society, demonstrate moral integrity, and exhibit a pious fear of God.

Although Zaydī scholars enumerate a number of qualities that highlight the moral dimensions of the Imāmate, their focus remains primarily political. First and foremost, a qualified candidate must receive the oath of allegiance from his supporters and lead them in an uprising (*khurūj*) against a tyrant. It is through this act of open revolt against injustice that a contender's genetic and scholarly potential is transformed into the charismatic authority of an Imām.[18] His success in mobilizing support is evidence of his political acumen, whereas his defeat of an illegitimate government demonstrates his military skills and competence. Once established in office, a Zaydī Imām is charged with administrative responsibilities, which include such practical tasks as caring for orphans, leading the congregational Friday prayers, and managing religious endowments. It should be emphasized that the Imām (according to the Zaydīs) must hold real power as the active head of state, for his very purpose is to administer and lead the Muslim community.

The Zaydī emphasis on the political dimensions of the Imāmate is also embodied in (i) the restrictions placed on the legal authority of the Imām and (ii) the allowance made for an Imām lacking scholarly qualifications. In the first instance, it is important to note that the Imām's legal opinions are not considered intrinsically superior to those of other Zaydī scholars. As products of *ijtihād*, they represent a scholar's "best guess" as to the will of God on a given issue. This leaves open the possibility that they might be wrong. The correctness of a legal ruling is established only through the consensus of all the descendants of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn.[19] In other words, the Zaydīs locate ultimate legal authority in the broader social category of ʿAlids (descendants of ʿAlī) as opposed to the person of the Imām. A Zaydī Imām retains the power to enforce his legal rulings throughout the state based on political considerations (i.e., the need for a single, cohesive legal code). These rulings, however, are not inherently superior to those of other jurists. After the death of a sitting Zaydī Imām, his successor may theoretically formulate his own legal code with no regard for his predecessor's positions.

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[18] Bear in mind that there is no basis for revolting against a government that is just. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 8, there were other avenues for selecting an Imām during the long period of Zaydī rule in Yemen.

[19] This statement masks a heated controversy among Zaydī scholars regarding the characterization of Zaydism as a formal school of law (*madhhab*). For a detailed analysis of this issue, see Haykel and Zysow, "*Madhhab*."

Evidence of the political underpinnings of the Zaydī Imāmate is also found is the school's later acceptance of "restricted" (*muḥtasib*) Imāms. According to this idea, a candidate who does not possess the requisite scholarly (or sometimes moral) qualities for the office can still become Imām if he is powerful enough to defend the state, protect the weak, enjoin good, and forbid wrong. These restricted Imāms were often figures who simply won authority on the battlefield. They were expected to consult religious scholars on legal issues to ensure the proper administration of justice. The doctrine of the restricted Imām legitimized Zaydī Imāms in Yemen who fell short of the community's expectations while preserving the theoretical importance of knowledge to the institution of the Imāmate. At the same time, it reflected the degree to which the Zaydī Imāmate was predicated on the exercise of political authority.

To summarize, the Zaydīs believe that the Imāmate rests with (i) any descendant of Ḥasan or Ḥusayn possessing (ii) the requisite scholarly and moral qualifications who (iii) successfully leads a rebellion against a tyrannical state. The Imām must establish a just order dedicated to enjoining good and forbidding wrong. The politically centered implications of rational divine justice underlie the Zaydī embrace of an activist Imāmate.

C. The Imāmate of the Ismāʿīlī and Twelver Shīʿa

The Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers trace the Imāmate through a single genetic line. The first Imām is ʿAlī, who was explicitly appointed by the Prophet at Ghadīr Khumm, followed by his sons, Ḥasan and then Ḥusayn. For the (Nizārī) Ismāʿīlīs, Ḥasan is considered a "trustee" (*mustawdaʿ*) Imām while Ḥusayn is considered a "permanently established" (*mustaqarr*) Imām. Both groups agree that only Ḥusayn has the authority to transmit the Imāmate to his descendants.[20] For the Twelvers, the transfer of the Imāmate from Ḥasan to Ḥusayn (from brother to brother) is considered an exceptional circumstance resulting from their inclusion among the "people of the cloak" (discussed earlier). The Imāmate is then limited to Ḥusayn's descendants. It is passed from father to son through an explicit process of designation (*naṣṣ*). As discussed later in the chapter, the Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers favor different lines of succession, although they broadly agree on the scope and powers of the Imām.

The Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers place a far greater emphasis on the knowledge-based duties of the Imām than do the Zaydīs. In the process,

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[20] Virani, *The Ismailis*, 83–4.

they draw on the knowledge-centered argument for the Imāmate detailed in Chapter 1. Recall that rational divine justice necessitates that God send an Imām out of His kindness (*lutf*) to provide the correct interpretation of revelation. Because the Imām is entrusted with ensuring that the community adheres to a proper understanding of Islam, he must possess inerrancy in his interpretive endeavors. This quality of inerrancy or (more accurately) protection from error is called *ʿiṣma*. As becomes clear in subsequent chapters, the scope of *ʿiṣma* was fiercely debated in Ismāʿīlī and Twelver circles. Some scholars extend it to cover all of the actions and thoughts of an Imām, elevating him to an almost superhuman plane where he is protected not just from sin but from errors of any kind. Other scholars advocate a more limited version of *ʿiṣma* in which only the Imām's legal rulings and interpretations are protected from error.

The Ismāʿīlī and Twelver belief in (at the very minimum) the interpretive inerrancy of the Imām complicates the process of identifying him from a range of potential candidates. Given that humans are themselves imperfect, how can they recognize an Imām whose claim to authority is predicated on his perfect knowledge?[21] The answer is provided by the doctrine of *naṣṣ* (designation), which states that each Imām (or Prophet) explicitly names his successor. In such a manner, a continuous line of divinely protected and inerrant leadership is traced back to the Prophet Muḥammad, who explicitly appointed ʿAlī. The larger community has no voice in determining the identity of the Imām because the appointment is the exclusive purview of God.

Designation opens the door to a number of potential complications. For example, an Imām may not possess a male heir, or the heir may not have reached the age of maturity at the time of his accession. The designation may also be compromised by the political situation. In many instances, the current Imām might delay the announcement until he is near death to protect the life of his heir from the ruling monarch. The designation may be entrusted to a handful of supporters in a private setting, inevitably leading to disputes and rival claims. The controversial succession that precipitated the split between the Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers in 765 involved the apparent designation of a successor (Ismāʿīl) who predeceased his father. This episode is considered in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Overall, the Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers are in agreement on foundational aspects of the Imāmate. Both favor a knowledge-centered line of

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[21] This matter is less problematic for the Zaydīs because the Zaydī Imām (who does not possess *ʿiṣma*) establishes his legitimacy through battlefield success and just administration of the state.

reasoning that legitimizes the Imām on the basis of rational divine justice. They argue that God sends Prophets (with revelation) and Imāms (with inerrant interpretation or *ʿiṣma*) to humanity as an act of kindness (*luṭf*). An Imām's identity is verified solely through a formal designation (*naṣṣ*) by his predecessor. He then serves as the proof (*ḥujja*) of God on earth, providing humanity with proper guidance.

The primary difference between the Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers concerns the balance between the Imām's knowledge-based and political responsibilities.[22] From the ninth through the thirteenth century, most Ismāʿīlī communities adhered to a maximalist conception of the knowledge and the political powers of the Imām. Their views, however, varied significantly depending on the community's political fortunes. In terms of knowledge, the Ismāʿīlī Imām was the key to salvation and the sole gateway to a proper understanding of the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) meanings of revelation. The Ismāʿīlīs integrated the Imāmate into a complex gnostic[23] system with a distinctive cosmology and a cyclical view of history. Human history was divided into seven periods, with each period heralded by a Prophet who brought revelation. Such a prophet was known as a *nāṭiq* (enunciator). The *nāṭiq* was followed by (i) an *asās*, who revealed the esoteric inner meaning of revelation, and (ii) a line of seven Imāms, the last of whom would abrogate the previous revelation and articulate a new one. This system changed as the Ismāʿīlīs transitioned from a hidden Imām (in the eighth century) to a ruling Imām (after the ninth century).

In addition to his role as the singular gateway to religious knowledge, the Ismāʿīlī Imām was the only legitimate source of political authority and tasked with the establishment of a just state. When in power, the Imām was expected to carry out the same practical tasks articulated by the Zaydīs (e.g., just administration, enjoining good and forbidding wrong). But in contrast to the Zaydīs, who required a military uprising to establish an Imām's credentials, the Ismāʿīlīs believed the Imām's legitimacy derived exclusively from designation. In other words, regardless of whether he chose to rebel or to remain hidden underground, the Imām retained all the requisite powers of the office. His decisions could not be questioned because his authority was rooted in his inerrant, divinely inspired knowledge.

For the Ismāʿīlīs, the pinnacle of this political interpretation of the Imāmate occurred in the early tenth century with the establishment of

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[22] This contrasts with the Zaydīs, who reject the notion of the Imām's inerrancy and equate his knowledge with that of any other qualified jurist.

[23] I use the term "gnostic" as it relates to the ancient Greek notion that the material world was created by the demiurge (an agent of God) but has a deeper spiritual reality.

the Fāṭimid state in North Africa and (later) Egypt. During the Fāṭimid period, Ismāʿīlism experienced a series of splits over succession. The resulting groups held a number of unique beliefs but remained largely in agreement on the doctrine of the Imāmate as described earlier. The two most important Ismāʿīlī communities (and the ones that survive into the modern period) are known as the Mustaʿlīs and the Nizārīs. The latter were particularly successful in establishing control over parts of Iran and Syria beginning in the eleventh century. Chapter 6 examines the impact of shifting political fortunes on the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī conception of the Imāmate, and Chapter 9 explores the modern Nizārī Ismāʿīlī abandonment of political aspirations in favor of a more global humanitarian perspective.

The Twelver view of the Imāmate is almost entirely weighted to the side of knowledge. The Imām's primary function is to provide a definitive interpretation of revelation. This role is exemplified by traditions in which various companions test the Imām on matters of Islamic law, seeking either inconsistencies or mistakes. In the Twelver sources, the Imām answers each question with skill, erudition, and consistency. Cases in which a ruling appears to disagree with past rulings are resolved by invoking dissimulation (*taqiyya*), the belief that one may conceal one's true views in times of danger or political necessity.[24] Oppositional traditions (often of Zaydī origin) highlight these disparities and inconsistencies as evidence of the falseness of the Twelver doctrine.

The central controversy among the early Twelvers concerned the origins and scope of the Imām's knowledge. Was it restricted to law and scriptural interpretation, or did it extend to all spheres of knowledge from animal languages to future events? Was the knowledge acquired through the special teachings and/or books of previous Imāms, or was it conferred directly by God? These issues polarized the early community between "supernaturalists" and "rationalists."[25] The tension between these competing visions persisted through the formative period of Twelver Shīʿism and is one of the core subjects of Chapter 7.

While emphasizing the Imām's knowledge, the Twelvers also acknowledged his theoretical political authority. Through the ninth century, they

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[24] Contemporary Twelver scholarship offers a typology of situations in which Imāms practiced *taqiyya*. These include instances in which they tried to protect their followers from persecution or distance themselves from extremist groups.

[25] The use of the terms "supernaturalist" and "rationalist" requires some justification and explanation. The former term refers to those who believed that the Imām's knowledge was directly conferred by God. The latter group emphasized the Imām's acquisition of knowledge through "natural" means, such as studying with or reading the writings of his predecessors.

held that the Imām was not required to seek political power until such a time when conditions were propitious. In the meantime, he functioned as a shadow leader exposing the deficiencies of the governing power. The ruling "caliph" was a political usurper, whereas the Imām was the de jure head of the community despite not holding the reins of power. This stance was justified on the basis of precautionary dissimulation (*taqiyya*), which permitted the Imām to delay his push for temporal power. After the disappearance (*ghayba*) of the twelfth Imām in 874, the Twelvers adopted a quietist position in anticipation of his return.[26]

Between the ninth and the fifteenth century, the Twelvers held that all political authority during the concealment of the Imām was inherently illegitimate. This position was partially mitigated by the rise of the Būyid dynasty, which ruled Iraq and much of Iran in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The religious loyalties of the Būyids seem to have inclined toward Zaydī Shīʿism. Although they retained the ʿAbbāsid caliph as a figurehead, they patronized Shīʿī scholars, helped institutionalize distinctively Shīʿī holidays, and appointed prominent Shīʿī figures to important bureaucratic posts. Such policies sparked discussions over whether it was permissible for Twelvers to hold governmental office. The Būyid period also provided the intellectual space for the Twelver community to elaborate its core theological principles and develop a formal legal framework. The rise of the Safavid Empire in 1501 heralded a new period in which Twelver scholars appropriated some of the hidden Imām's authority. This process accelerated significantly in the twentieth century. These developments are discussed in detail in Chapters 7 and 10.

III. SUMMARY

Table 2.1 summarizes the Zaydī, Ismāʿīlī, and Twelver views of the qualifications and scope of the Imāmate. All three groups claim a charismatic rapport (*walāya*) with the family of the Prophet (i.e., Muḥammad, ʿAlī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn) and their lineal descendants. This unifying bond serves as the spiritual nexus of Shīʿī devotional practices. Differences emerge with respect to the Imām's qualifications and the nature and scope of his authority. The Zaydīs open the Imāmate to any descendant of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn with the requisite scholarly and moral credentials. Most crucially, the Zaydī Imām must lead a successful uprising against a

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[26] Incidentally, this was the same period in which the Ismāʿīlīs were mobilizing to create a Shīʿī state in North Africa.

Table 2.1 *The Imāmate*

	Zaydīs	Ismāʿīlīs	Twelvers
Walāya (see also Chapter 3)	Charismatic bond of loyalty/love for ʿAlī and the family of the Prophet.	Charismatic bond of loyalty/love for ʿAlī and the family of the Prophet.	Charismatic bond of loyalty/love for ʿAlī and the family of the Prophet.
		Note that the term has additional meanings, including *wilāya* (political authority) and *walī* (the holder of spiritual authority).	Note that the term has additional meanings, including *wilāya* (political authority) and *walī* (the holder of spiritual authority).
Lineal Qualifications	Any descendant of ʿAlī through Ḥasan and Ḥusayn (his two sons with Fāṭima).	A single genetic line that begins with ʿAlī and (for some) Ḥasan and is subsequently restricted to Ḥusayn and his descendants.	A single genetic line that begins with ʿAlī and Ḥasan and is subsequently restricted to Ḥusayn and his descendants.
Other Requirements	A range of scholarly and moral qualities together with political acumen and military competence.	Demonstrable knowledge and a male heir.	Demonstrable knowledge and a male heir.
Selection	A qualified candidate becomes Imām by virtue of leading a successful military uprising (*khurūj*) against a tyrant.	Formal designation by previous Imām (*naṣṣ*).	Formal designation by previous Imām (*naṣṣ*).
ʿIṣma	No. Interpretive authority resides collectively in all of the descendants of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn.	Yes. Imām must provide correct interpretation of revelation.	Yes. Imām must provide correct interpretation of revelation.

	Zaydīs	Ismāʿīlīs	Twelvers
Political vs. Knowledge Functions	The Imāmate is heavily weighted toward political functions.	Changes over time: Gradual decrease of the political functions of the Imām after the thirteenth century. Knowledge consistently important.	Changes over time: Scholars increasingly appropriate the political functions of the Imām. Knowledge consistently important.
Need for Imām at all times	No.	Yes. An Imām is theologically required at all times to interpret revelation.	Yes. An Imām is theologically required at all times to interpret revelation.
Other Important Terms (see also Chapter 4)	*Daʿwa* (spreading the call for support) *Khurūj* (uprising)	*Daʿwa* (spreading the call for support) *Naṣṣ* (formal designation) *Ẓāhir* vs. *Bāṭin* (exoteric vs. esoteric meaning) *Nāṭiq* vs. *Asās* (enunciator vs. interpreter) The *Qāʾim* (one who rises up) The *Mahdī* (one who is rightly guided)	*Naṣṣ* (formal designation) *Badāʾ* (early on, a change in the divine decision resulting from free will; later, a change in the divine decision reulting from historical circumstance) *Ghayba* (occultation) The *Qāʾim* (one who rises up) The *Mahdī* (one who is rightly guided)

tyrant and establish a just state that enjoins good and forbids wrong. By contrast, the Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers restrict the Imāmate to specific lines of descent. They also emphasize the knowledge requirements of an Imām, particularly his role as an inerrant interpreter of revelation. The Ismāʿīlīs elaborate this role into a detailed cosmology while the Twelvers remain

divided regarding its nature and scope. In terms of politics, Ismāʿīlī efforts culminated in the establishment of an Imāmate in the Fāṭimid period that gave way to a depoliticization of the office in recent times. The Twelvers underwent a series of changes that gradually transferred political authority from a quietist hidden Imām to various other representatives (e.g., the Shahs or the scholars).

<div align="center">SUGGESTED READINGS FOR FURTHER STUDY</div>

The following works provide a history of the early Shīʿa and the first four caliphates:

Martin Hinds, *Studies in Early Islamic History*, ed. Jere Bacharach, Lawrence Conrad, and Patricia Crone (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1996).
Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), vol. 1, particularly 187–230 ("The Early Muslim State") and 241–79 ("The Islamic Opposition").
Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

The following works provide a general discussion of *walāya*:

Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., s.v. "Wilāya" (Dien and Walker).
Maria Dakake, *The Charismatic Community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

For the Imāmate, see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Imāma" (Madelung).

The following works focus specifically on the Zaydīs (Z), the Ismāʿīlīs (I), and the Twelvers (T):

Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shiʿism*, translated by David Streight (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009). (I)
Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chapter 3. (T)
Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., s.v. "Zaydiyya" (Madelung). (Z)
Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., s.v. "Ismāʿīliyya" (Madelung). (I)
Farhad Daftary, "The Earliest Ismāʿīlīs," *Arabica* 38 (1991): 214–45. (I)
Farhad Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), chapter 3. (I)
Najam Haider, "Zaydism: A Theological and Political Survey," *Religion Compass* 4 (2010): 436–42. (Z)
Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1–24. (Z)
Bernard Haykel and Aron Zysow, "What Makes a *Madhhab* a *Madhhab*," *Arabica* 59 (2013): 332–71. (Z)
Etan Kohlberg, *Belief and Law in Imāmī Shīʿism* (Brookfield, VT: Gower, 1991), particularly chapters 1, 3, and 13. (T)

Wilferd Madelung, "Aspects of Ismāʿīlī Theology: The Prophetic Chain and the God beyond Being," in *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam* (London: Variorum, 1985), chapter 17. (I)

Wilferd Madelung, "Ismāʿīlism: The Old and the New *Daʿwa*," in *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Albany, NY: Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988), chapter 7. (I)

Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shiʿite Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1993), 3–18. (T)

Jaʿfar Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shiʿi Islam*, translated by Reza Shah-Kazemi (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 61–119. (T)

Muhammad Husayn Tabatabaʿi, *Shiʿa*, translated by Sayyid Husayn Nasr (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 1981), 173–90. (T)

Shafique Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). (I)