

Drawing Inspiration from Imam ‘Alī’s Life and Character (Part I): A Lecture by Sayyid Sulayman Hassan

Summary

In the middle of Surat al-Baqarah, God says, “Thus We have made you a middle nation” (Qur’an, 2:143), a call to the Muslim community that it is bound to be a role model for all of humanity. Numerous Qur’anic verses bring to light the causal relationship between being moderate and being righteous, and prophetic traditions expand on the degree to which keeping a balance between the two contributes to a felicitous life.

In two parts, this paper examines some of the virtues of Imam ‘Alī (‘a), son of Abū Ṭālib and successor of the noble Prophet of Islam (ṣ), as outlined in a speech by Sayyid Sulayman Hassan on the anniversary of Imam ‘Alī’s (‘a) martyrdom. The talk was originally held in Ramadan of 2009 in Dearborn, Michigan (The full talk may be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPox6i-IDEo> under the title *Character of Imam Ali*.) In particular, it explores the Imam’s exemplary embodiment of balance as revealed in difficult situations, along with some of its implications.

The first part opens by explaining the need for attaching ourselves to role models as a way to bring divine teachings to life. In order to take a deeper glimpse into God’s attributes, the Prophet (ṣ) and Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) serve to model the theoretical, thereby allowing our understanding to evolve from intellectual concepts to experiential awareness. To illustrate this, the core of this piece draws lessons from some of Imam ‘Alī’s (‘a) life stories.

It’s worth noting that this paper underwent a series of minor emendations

before reaching its current form. The original speech was first transcribed verbatim and with the speaker's permission, subsequently adjusted to fit a written framework. This was done based on the transcriber's judgments about what should or should not be included – using creative license to omit, add, and rearrange elements of the text.

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The Prophet (ﷺ) and Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) as Mediums that Stimulate Greater Understanding of the Divine

One of the honors that Allah (swt) has given to those who have chosen to follow Ahl al-Bayt is familiarity with the character and life story of Amīr al-Mu'minīn.⁽¹⁾ It is a matter of great pride for the followers of Ahl al-Bayt that in addition to the Qur'an, we have an entire heritage of sayings, letters, and sermons from Amīr al-Mu'minīn and his successors through which to guide our lives.

The prayers that we make, rooted in the Qur'an, help to give our lives consistency and constancy, and this consistency and constancy can only come when we have models in our life who demonstrate how to fulfill all of the different and sometimes conflicting roles that we must satisfy. As human beings we sometimes have roles that overlap or conflict, and it is not sufficient for us to simply look at a book or a set of teachings to understand how to bring those together. It is through the examples that we have of the Prophet (ﷺ) and his infallible successors that we are able to harmonize those teachings in practice and bring them to fruition.

For example, when we say that Allah (swt) is *al-Raḥmān* (Most Merciful), His mercy is such that it encompasses all things^[2] – رَحْمَتُهُ وَسِعَتْ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ – including His trials and His punishment, and including the hardships that we face. When I get sick, or if there is an earthquake, that too is part of Allah's mercy (*rahmah*) which encompasses all things. His anger (*ghaḍab*), however, is particular, and it too is encompassed under the broader umbrella of Allah's system of mercy.

The question, though, is: What can that mercy *mean* for me, aside from being a concept within my head? When it comes to Allah having a universal mercy, I can understand the concept – meaning to love, to show kindness. But when it comes to a particular, I will not know what that means because if it is a mercy that allows such major tragedies to take place in the world – like war, earthquakes, and tsunamis – then I’m left with the following questions: *What does mercy mean for me? Will Allah (swt) help me overcome this problem that I face? When a loved one is sick, can I pray to a merciful God? What does that mercy mean when thousands of people were just killed in some natural disaster or some man-made disaster somewhere else in the world?* At first glance, mercy here seems to not have a tangible meaning. It remains a concept that is inaccessible to the human mind and emotion.

That said, it *is* still mercy in a real sense, even if we cannot easily relate to it. But in order for Allah to make it something that we can understand, He has placed a perfect manifestation of His mercy in the person of the Prophet (ﷺ), and that He sent him as a “mercy” for the entire world.^[3] Thus, Allah’s mercy, which is universal, is perfectly manifested in the person of the Prophet (ﷺ). That universal mercy is now on a level and in a human dimension that we can relate to. If, for instance, I have a prayer to make to Allah (swt) – a *ḥāja* or need – then I know what the reaction or feeling of a merciful human being, or an infinitely merciful prophet, would be. It is through this newfound understanding that I can better recognize how Allah’s mercy operates within His creation, even though I cannot understand the greater interests^[4] of the universe as a whole, which may allow many things to take place in the world – things that I cannot understand or relate to. In other words, when it comes down to the human level, it is through the manifestation of Allah’s mercy in the Prophet (ﷺ) that I can relate to His mercy. Therefore, I can approach Allah through the Prophet (ﷺ) and through those who are a manifestation of Allah’s mercy (and His other names). In this way, the belief that “God is merciful” acquires emotional content that gives us meaning and motivation. It is no longer purely a theoretical notion.

Likewise, when we call Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) “the gate of Allah through which He is approached” (بَابُ اللَّهِ الَّذِي مِنْهُ يُؤْتَى)^[5] – one of the ranks of our Prophet and his progeny – it is by no means idolatry (*shirk*). In fact, it is our greatest insurance policy against either a) ascribing partners to Allah and giving Him a human dimension, or b) not being able to understand and relate to Allah, and thereby moving Him away from us to a point where He is beyond our ability to know.

In reality, the essence and reality of Allah, the way in which He makes decisions for the world and even for our own well-being, and the level of His knowledge and actions are so far beyond our comprehension that we cannot understand what His mercy might mean for us. Does it mean that when my son or daughter is sick, I can pray for their health and Allah will make them well? Or will He cause them to suffer an unspeakable sickness? Is that better for me on some level? It may be better for me on some level, and I can understand that intellectually, but I cannot relate to it. If we can only understand Allah in terms of His attributes on that level, then we will never be able to relate to Him, sincerely approach Him, and pray to Him.

This is why we see that in Qur’anic verses and *aḥādīth*^[6] – reported by not just one subset of Muslims, but by all Muslims – the Prophet (ﷺ) is described as someone who is manifesting Allah’s attributes.^[7] The Qur’an itself says that He is a mercy for the entire universe, and the other attributes of Allah are also manifested through him. After the Prophet (ﷺ), these attributes were manifested through Ahl al-Bayt (‘a). And by perceiving how Allah’s infinite attributes are to be manifested on the worldly or human level, we can relate to Allah (swt). And this is what allows us to maintain the pristine concept of Islamic *tawḥīd* (oneness [of God]).

Allah (swt) is infinite – and thus beyond our understanding – but His attributes have both intellectual and emotive content. There is no sense that, for example, mercy or forgiveness can’t be understood^[8]. Without a doubt, every attribute has true meaning, and we relate to them by way of their manifestation through

those who are perfect role models for humanity. This is the role of the Ahl al-Bayt. This is why we turn to them for guidance, inspiration, and leadership; for an understanding of Islamic laws and ethics; and also as intermediaries between us and Allah (swt) to have our needs fulfilled by Him. This is what solidifies and strengthens our *tawhīd*.

The Distinct Superiority of Imam ‘Alī (‘a) as a Member of the Prophet’s (ﷺ) Progeny

This occasion (i.e. the anniversary of Imam ‘Alī’s martyrdom) is one of those times when we speak and think of the greatest of the members of Ahl al-Bayt – the one whom all of our Imams, with their own level of perfection and divine grace, would revere.

Someone once came to our 6th Imam, Imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (‘a), and said, “Peace be upon you, O *Amīr al-Mu‘minīn*.” The Imam paused, the expression on his face changed, and he said: (*What did you say?*) “*Amīr al-Mu‘minīn* is a title that is only appropriate for the *one*”^[9] who was appointed directly by the Prophet and who was made the “leader of the believers” by the Prophet. There are many *aḥādīth* that confirm the idea that all of the Imams fulfill the same functions; for instance, the *ḥadīth* which reads, “All of us are divinely-appointed leaders (مَهْدِي), and all of us carry out God’s orders (قَائِم بِالْحَقِّ).” Every Imam is a *waṣī*, or successor, because each is either the successor of the Prophet (ﷺ) or the successor of a previous successor (i.e. a non-immediate successor). Thus, they are all the legatees of the Prophet (ﷺ) and the trustees of his teachings. But despite their common roles, goals, and origin, Imam ‘Alī (‘a) is unique in his status; there is only one who was accorded the titles *Amīr al-Mu‘minīn*, *al-Fārūq al-A‘ẓam* (The Great Distinguisher [Between Truth and Falsehood]), and *al-Ṣiddīq al-Akbar* (The Greatest of the Truthful Ones).

So who was *Amīr al-Mu‘minīn*, and what should he represent for us? There are many aspects of his life that we speak of frequently. I don’t want to repeat that which we may have heard before; rather, I’d like to explore some of the unique

aspects of the Imam's character.

Maintaining Exemplary Balance and Precision in the face of Tremendous Ignorance

One of *Amīr al-Mu'minīn's* ('a) prominent features is his ability to maintain an Islamic ideal of balance in circumstances where everyone around him - including the pious believers, and those who had a great deal of experience and sincerity - was unable to understand where the right, proper, and balanced course of action was. One of these instances was when the sedition (*fitna*) of the Khawārij^[10] took place. In one of his sermons, Amīr al-Mu'minīn says that if it were not for him, no one would know how to deal with the Khawārij after the Prophet (ṣ).^[11] Here are people who pray and fast, and the way they pray would make all of the Muslims - including the sincere believers - green with envy. They stay up all night engaged in acts of worship, their bodies show signs of having engaged in long prostration, and they recite the Qur'an day in and day out. Nevertheless, it is as if Islam has gone through their being and not tarried or stopped within them, just as an arrow might pass through its target and not remain in it; they had no knowledge of Islam except for its superficial aspects. But with these conditions, people did not know how to deal with them; many Muslims were under the impression that these are signs of a true Muslim.

The Imam says that it was he who told people how to deal with them - in other words, how to combat them, how to eliminate their sedition, and how to stop them from inflicting harm on the Muslim ummah - without going overboard or creating a long-lasting division within the Islamic world. It is that balance in understanding how to deal with external enemies and ignorant friends, as well as all of the other differences and divergences that exist inside and outside of the Islamic ummah, which propels us to turn to Amīr al-Mu'minīn and derive inspiration from him.

His Balance in Dealing with Fierce Accusations

I'd like to further delve into the discussion of maintaining balance by recounting

a few incidents from the Imam's life in this regard. God-willing, these stories will provide us with inspiration to address and resolve the differences that we face within our community, within the broader Muslim community, and also with humanity as a whole.

In the beginning of the Imam's struggle in Kufa, it is said that he would give sermons and ask people their opinions on how to confront Mu'āwiyyah^[12] who at the time had raised the flag of rebellion from Syria and made all sorts of false allegations^[13] and from which the Imam was absolutely free of any guilt. The most blameless person in the entire ummah was Amīr al-Mu'minīn in regard to what had happened in the days of the third caliph. Yet when Mu'āwiyyah raised the flag of sedition, the Imam was seeking the opinions of those around him in Kufa. Many people stood up and said: *O Amīr al-Mu'minīn, we think that such-and-such is the right course of action but we are at peace with whoever you make peace, and we are at war with whoever you go to war* (نَحْنُ سِلْمٌ لِمَنْ سَالَمْتَ) (وَحَرْبٌ لِمَنْ حَارَبْتَ); *we give our opinions because you asked us, but we will follow your opinion*. At this time someone stood up and said, "Do you think that you're going to take us to fight Mu'āwiyyah as you took us to fight the People of Jamal^[14] before? This will never happen! We won't do it!" This person then said something that was unworthy of the rank and nobility of Amīr al-Mu'minīn.

Now in that environment in Kufa, people knew exactly what had happened (in the Battle of Jamal) right in the neighborhoods of Basra,^[15] which was a few hundred kilometers to the south. They were well aware of the treachery that took place and the great harm that it brought to the unity of the Islamic ummah. They also knew what Mu'āwiyyah was planning in Damascus.^[16] The people in the crowd could not bear to have somebody stand up and offer an insincere opinion that was absolutely venomous and vindictive against Amīr al-Mu'minīn. As a result, a commotion arose in the masjid and when that person, Arbad al-Fazārī, fled, the people ran after him. It is said that in that severe commotion - in that *fitna* - he was killed; he was attacked, and perhaps

trampled.

When news came to Amīr al-Mu'minīn that Arbad had been killed, the Imam became concerned and demanded to know who had killed him, because even though Arbad rose up to turn people against Amīr al-Mu'minīn, justice was what the Imam was speaking of and calling people towards; he would not want justice to be trampled upon in his own masjid. He asked, "Who killed him?" They replied by saying that in that commotion, the people of various tribes went to pursue the man - that he deserved to be punished for what he said, because he had breached the trust of the Islamic ummah - and so it isn't known; various people came and he was killed. The Imam said that he is someone who has been killed by a state of ignorance and blindness (قَتِيلٌ عَمِيَّةٌ); it was a general sedition that took place and his blame cannot be pinned on a single person. But even so, as a Muslim who was not deserving of death, his life cannot go in vain. Thus, the Imam ordered that his family be compensated for his wrongful death by the public treasury of the Muslims (دِيَّتُهُ مِنْ بَيْتِ مَالِ الْمُسْلِمِينَ); all of the Muslims should bear the responsibility and compensate his family for that death.^[17] Remarkably, even though Arbad had risen up against the Imam, the Imam was not willing to have his blood go in vain.

Following this incident, it is said that some people spoke up to express their support for the Imam. They wanted to let him know that they are sincere in following him, and that Arbad's opinion did not match that of the majority. Before going home, the Imam briefly addressed the public. Despite its brevity, it is instructive. Imagine the commotion. Imagine the heightened emotions; people had lost loved ones in the Battle of Jamal, and they were volunteering their money and their very lives to traverse a great distance to Ṣiffīn (in Syria at the time) in order to combat the rebellion of Mu'āwīyyah. When people are willing to give their very lives - or rather, when lives have already been offered - this is not a matter that can be taken lightly.

In that commotion, the Imam showed incredible balance and composure; he did not let emotions get the better of him or his followers. He said:

الطَّرِيقُ مُشْتَرَكٌ وَالنَّاسُ فِي الْحَقِّ سَوَاءٌ وَمَنْ اجْتَهَدَ رَأْيُهُ فِي نَصِيحَةِ الْعَامَّةِ فَلَهُ مَا نَوَى وَقَدْ قَضَى مَا عَلَيْهِ

The path (that we are taking) is a joint path and all people have the same rights (to speak out and express their opinions), but if a person gives his full effort and strives to be sincere to the public (or the generality of the Muslims), then he will get what he intended, and he has fulfilled his responsibility.^[18]

That is to say, it is not that the Imam and his followers were going to take one path alone while everyone else takes another path; rather, everyone is in the Islamic society together. The Imam was essentially giving two lessons. First (to those who may have gotten emotionally carried away), if someone is giving a sincere opinion, we should not silence them because we refuse to hear it or we disagree with it. Even if I know for a fact that what I am saying is true and what this person is saying is wrong, we both have a right (النَّاسُ فِي الْحَقِّ سَوَاءٌ). So if someone is offering sincere advice, we must respect them and let them be heard. Allah (swt) knows whether our intention is good or evil, and He will judge opinions and intentions in accordance with His infinite knowledge. Second, one should not believe oneself to be free of responsibility; it is not the case that everyone may express every opinion without bearing any responsibility. Instead, they must do their utmost to be sincere to the public (*‘āmmah*).

It sometimes happens that we may say something because we have an opinion, but we are unwittingly venting rumors. Sometimes we say or quote things that we believe may be true, but without having fully confirmed that they are true. And that is not something that we have a right to do. We have to make sure that if we are speaking in the public domain and carrying the public trust, that we give *all* of our possible efforts to ensure that what we say is proper and correct.

After his short talk, the Imam stepped down from the *minbar* (pulpit), and went back to his house to let things calm down. The Imam is trying to raise an army. He is trying to motivate people to do what is right. But at the same time, he is

trying to moderate their emotions and to make sure that their energies are only going to be spent where it is both profitable and pleasing to Allah (swt). In addition, the Imam is trying to ensure that those who may wish ill towards the general body of the Muslims do not have a bad influence on the Muslims...

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The second part of this speech will be published in the near future, in shā' Allah.

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^[1] A title attributed to Imam 'Alī ('a) which translates as "Commander of the Faithful."

^[2] See Qur'an 6:147 and 7:156.

^[3] See Qur'an 21:107: رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

^[4] I.e. *masāliḥ* and *mafāsid*, or that which serves the public interest or harms it, respectively.

^[5] As read, for example, in a famous supplication known as *Du'ā' al-Nudbah* which laments the 12th Imam's absence.

^[6] Plural of *ḥadīth*, a saying ascribed to the Prophet (ṣ) or a member of Ahl al-Bayt.

^[7] A famous example is the Prophet's statement equating his daughter's displeasure with his own, and his displeasure with God's. The equality of the Prophet's displeasure with God's is alluded to in the Qur'an, 33:57.

^[8] In reference to *ta'tīl*, or negating God's attributes.

^[9] See *Biḥārul Anwār*, vol. 37, p. 331; *Tafsīr al-‘Ayyāshī*, vol. 1, p. 276; and *Wasā’il al-Shī‘ah*, vol. 14, p. 600, among others.

^[10] Literally “those who left,” in reference to a group of people who left Imam ‘Alī’s (‘a) army against his opponent, Mu‘āwiyah, and broke away from mainstream Islam. It’s adherents believe that only Allah can rule over them. The Khawārij therefore rebelled against the Imam, whom they claim committed a grave sin when he accepted a peace negotiation in the Battle of Ṣiffīn. At one point, they even labeled him a disbeliever. Among other things, the Khawārij were known for their shallow understanding of Islamic rituals; they emphasized rules to a great extent, but did not understand or reflect over the values which these rituals intend to cultivate within us.

^[11] See sermon 93 of *Nahjul Balāghah*.

^[12] Son of Abū Sufyān whose rule as the governor of Syria marked the beginning of the Umayyad Dynasty.

^[13] At the core of which is his claim that the Imam was complicit in the murder of the third caliph ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān.

^[14] In reference to the Battle of the Camel, also known as the *First Fitna* or Muslim civil war, which was fought between the Imam and ‘Ā’ishah (along with her supporters, Ṭalḥah and Zubayr).

^[15] The name of a city in Iraq.

^[16] That is, to depose the Imam and declare himself as caliph.

^[17] Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim al-Minqari, *Waq‘at Ṣiffīn*, 93-95.

^[18] Naşr ibn Muzāḥim al-Minqari, *Waq‘at Şiffīn*, 93.