

Hujjatul Islam Wal Muslimeen Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi



website: www.panjatanpak.com
email: info@panjatanpak.com

What Is Shi'ism?

Shī'a Islam

Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

May Almighty Allah bless Prophet Muhammad and his progeny

“A faith in the beginning is simple & uncomplicated.

As time goes on, people start elaborating those simple beliefs
and that is when disputes arise & different sects are established.

It has happened in all previous religions and Islam was not an exception.”

SSA Rizvi

A. INTRODUCTION

The name “Shī'a” or “Shi'ite” entered the Western media's common vocabulary during the Islamic Revolution of Iran, and it is being frequently heard now in context of the war in Iraq when reporters or commentators say that sixty to sixty-five percent of the Iraqis are “Shi'ite” or “Shī'a Muslims”.

If you travel across the Middle East and Asia, you will soon realize that besides the **similarity and uniformity** found among the Muslims on basic issues, there is also a great **diversity** in the world of Islam. Not only in the composition of its membership but also in thought and practice: there are different **theological sects** and a variety of **spiritual brotherhoods**.

However, the most the important division in Islamic theology has placed the Muslims into two main schools of thought: the Sunni and the Shī‘a. The Muslims who believe that ‘Alī was the immediate successor and caliph of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) are known as “Shī‘a”. The name “Shī‘a” is a short form of the Arabic phrase: “*Shī‘atu ‘Alī* – a follower of ‘Alī.” ‘Alī, son of Abu Tālib, was the cousin and the son-in-law of the Prophet of Islam.

Out of almost a billion Muslims in the world, about fifteen percent are Shī‘a Muslims. The following table gives the distribution of Shī‘as in countries where they are found in considerable numbers:

<u>Country</u>	<u>Shī‘a Population</u>	<u>Shī‘a % of Total Population</u>	
Iran	60,000,000	90.0	
Pakistan	30,000,000	20.0	
India	10,000,000	1.8	
Iraq	16,000,000	65.0	
Turkey	1,000,000		
Afghanistan	4,000,000	15.0	
Lebanon	1,000,000	30.0	
Bahrain	170,000	70.0	
Saudi Arabia	440,000	7.0	mostly in the eastern region
Azerbaijan	5,000,000	62.0	

We can safely say that there are about **127 million** Shī‘as in the world.

* * *

It is important to note that in most Muslim communities and for most part of the their history, the Shī‘as have lived in peace and harmony with the Sunni Muslims. Polemics in religious writings on both sides has been part of our history, but that was limited to the learned and the educated elite, and it never degenerated into physical violence against one another.

Unfortunately, in the last twenty years, the Shī‘a Muslims have been persecuted on religious and political grounds in certain Muslim countries, especially in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq. In Pakistan, by the Sipah-e

Sahaba group; in Afghanistan, by the former Taleban government; and in Iraq, by Saddam's former regime.

B. WHO IS A MUSLIM?

The Sunnis and the Shī'as both are Muslims, so let us first define a "Muslim". A Muslim is one who believes in the following three principles of Islam:

1. **Monotheism (*Tawhīd*).**

This is the belief that there is only One God who is the origin and creator of the universe. This is the foundation stone of Islam and is reflected in the famous sentence that says that, "I bear witness that there is no god but Allāh".

2. **Prophethood (*Nubuwwa*).**

This is the belief that God sent thousands of prophets and messengers to guide the human society. Some of the most important prophets of God in whom a Muslim must believe are: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (peace be upon them all).

A Muslim must also believe that Prophet Muhammad was the last prophet and final messenger of God. No prophet or messenger is to come after him. This is reflected in the famous saying: "I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God".

3. **Resurrection and Life Hereafter (*Qiyāmat*).**

This is a belief that at the end of time, all human beings will be resurrected by God and will be held accountable for their worldly life. The life in hereafter will be an eternal life. However, whether it will be blissful or full of sorrow depends on how we spend our present life.

All Muslims agree that the above three principles are the minimum requirement for joining into the fold of Islam. Anyone who does not believe in all three of the above principles cannot be called a Muslim.

* * *

All the Muslims —the Sunnis as well as the Shī'as— also agree on the following important issues:

- The **Qur'ān** is the Word of God revealed upon Prophet Muhammad, and that it is unaltered, and the main source of Islamic views. For example, one of the earliest Shī'a scholar, Shaykh as-Sadûq (d. 381/991), said: "Our belief is that the Qur'ān, which Allāh revealed to His Prophet Muhammad (s) is the one between the two covers. And it is that which is in the hands of the people, & is not greater in extent than that... And he who asserts that we say that it is greater in extent than this (the present text) is a liar." Not only this most famous of the early Shī'a scholar believes in the integrity of the Qur'ān, even the most famous contemporary scholar of the Shī'a world, the Grand Ayatullāh Sayyid Abul Qāsim al-Khu'ī has written, *al-Bayān*, in which he convincingly proves the integrity of the Qur'ān. (You may see its English translation published by the Oxford University Press in 1998 under the title "*The Prolegomena of the Qur'ān*".)
- The **Sunna** (sayings and deeds) of the Prophet of Islam is, after the Qur'ān, the main source of guidance for the Muslims.
- The **Ka'ba** in Mecca is the symbolic House of God, and that Muslims face its direction whenever they stand for their daily prayers.
 - The following famous tenets of Islam are accepted by both Muslims, the Sunni as well as the Shī'a:

- * the **five daily prayers** (salât),
- * the **fasting** during the month of Ramadhân (sawm),
- * paying of religious **charity and monetary dues** (like zakât),
- * the performing of **pilgrimage** to Mecca (hajj).

C. WHO IS A SHĪ‘A MUSLIM?

A ShĪ‘a Muslim believes in all the issues mentioned above. What makes a ShĪ‘ī different from a Sunnī are two main concepts: leadership and justice.

(1) Leadership (*imâmat*):

ShĪ‘ī school of thought believes that Islam is a complete way of life, and therefore it is inconceivable that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) would have ignored the issue of leadership after his death.

ShĪ‘as are of the opinion that the Prophet not only gave importance to the issue of leadership and succession but also clearly appointed ‘Ali bin Abi Tâlib as his successor and caliph, and also mentioned that the leadership of Islam will continue in his family. We believe that whatever the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did was done in accordance with the will of God.

The Sunni Muslims are of the opinion that Prophet Muhammad set no guidelines for the institution of leadership after his death, and that it was upon the Muslims themselves to come up with a system of leadership. And, therefore, you see a variety of methods were used for appointment of leaders and caliphs:

1. through a limited selection by a small group of people in Saqīfa as happened in the case of the first caliph;
2. through a will written by the first caliph appointing the second;
3. through a committee of six people hand-picked by the second caliph as happened in case of the third caliph;
4. through people’s power when the masses insisted on ‘Ali to become their ruler;
5. through military superiority as witnessed in case of Mu‘awiya; and also
6. through hereditary in case of the Umayyids and the ‘Abbasids.

* * *

ShĪ‘ism bases its arguments on the divine precedence in which God never left the issue of leadership in the hands of the people; He appointed the prophets and their successors. Professor Wilfred Madelung of the Oxford University makes an interesting observation in his book, *The Succession to Muhammad*, published in 1997. He writes, “The Qur’ân advises the faithful to settle some matters by consultation, but not the succession to prophets. That, according to the Qur’ân, is settled by divine election, and God usually chooses their successors, whether they become prophets or not, from their own kin.” (p. 17)

The Prophet of Islam, from the very first day of his mission started introducing ‘Ali bin Abi Tâlib as his successor. He clarified that this was done by the will of God.

Names of the Shí‘a Imams (successors of the Prophet) and their era of leadership:

1. ‘Ali bin Abi Talib 632-661
2. Hasan bin ‘Ali 661-669
3. Husayn bin ‘Ali 669-680
4. ‘Ali Zayn al-‘Abidin 680-712
5. Muhammad al-Bãqir 712-735
6. Ja‘far as-Sãdiq 735-765
7. Musa al-Kãzim 765-799
8. ‘Ali ar-Riza 799-818
9. Muhammad bin ‘Ali 818-835
10. ‘Ali an-Naqi 835-868
11. Hasan al-‘Askari 868-873

12. Muhammad al-Mahdi 873-Living in Occultation.

The Twelfth Shí‘a Imam (or successor of the Prophet) is believed to have gone into occultation (that is, he is alive but is not known to anyone). This occultation will last till the reappearance of the Twelfth Imam as the Saviour who will establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The Shí‘as believe that the Mahdi will be assisted in his mission by Jesus.

* * *

Appointment of ‘Ali by the Prophet:

From the very first day of his mission, Prophet Muhammad started introducing ‘Ali bin Abi Tãlib as his successor.

Islam began when the Prophet Muhammad became forty years old. Initially, the mission was kept a secret. Then three years after the advent of Islam, the Prophet was ordered to commence the open declaration of his message. This was the occasion when Almighty Allãh revealed the verse “*And warn thy nearest relations.*” (26:214)

When this verse was revealed, the Prophet organized a feast that is known in history as “Summoning the Family — *Da‘wat dhu ‘l-‘Ashīra*”. The Prophet invited around forty men from the Banu Hāshim and asked ‘Ali bin Abi Tālib to make arrangements for the dinner. After having served his guests with food and drinks, when the Prophet wanted to speak to them about Islam, Abu Lahab forestalled him and said, “Your host has long since bewitched you.” All the guests dispersed before the Prophet could present his message to them.

The Prophet then invited them the next day. After the feast, he spoke to them, saying:

“O Sons of ‘Abdu ‘l-Muttalib! By Allāh, I do not know of any person among the Arabs who has come to his people with better than what I have brought to you. I have brought to you the good of this world and the next, and I have been commanded by the Lord to call you unto Him. Therefore, who amongst you will support me in this matter so that he may be my brother (*akhhī*), my successor (*wasiyyī*) and my caliph (*khalīfatī*) among you?”

This was the first time that the Prophet openly and publicly called the relations to accept him as the Messenger and Prophet of Allāh; he also uses the words “*akhhī wa wasiyyī wa khalīfatī*— my brother, my successor, my caliph” for the person who will aid him in this mission. No one answered him; they all held back except the youngest of them — ‘Ali bin Abi Tālib. He stood up and said, “I will be your helper, O Prophet of God.”

The Prophet put his hand on the back of ‘Ali’s neck and said:

“*Inna hadhā akhhī wa wasiyyī wa khalīfatī fikum, fasma ‘û lahu wa atī ‘û* — Verily this is my brother, my successor, and my caliph amongst you; therefore, listen to him and obey.”

This was a very explicit statement because the audience understood the appointment of ‘Ali very clearly. Some of them, including Abu Lahab, even joked with Abu Tālib saying that your nephew, Muhammad, has ordered you to listen to your son and obey him! At the least, this shows that the appointment of ‘Ali bin Abi Tālib was clear and explicit, not just implied.

* * *

After that, the Prophet at various places emphasized the issue of loving his Ahlul Bayt, seeking guidance from them, and drew the attention of the people to the special status that they had in the eyes of God and His Messenger.
(See 42:23)

* * *

Then the Formal Declaration:

Finally, just two months before his death, the Prophet clearly appointed ‘Ali in Ghadir Khumm as the leader (religious as well as political) of the Muslims. He said, “Whomsoever’s Master I am, this ‘Ali is his Master.” He also said, “I am leaving two precious things behind, as long as you hold on to them both you will never go astray: the Book of Allāh and my progeny.”

Question: Why have many Western scholars ignored the event of Ghadir Khumm? Since Western scholars mostly relied on anti-Shi‘a works, they naturally ignored the event of Ghadir Khumm. L. Veccia Vaglieri, one of the contributors to the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1953), writes:

“Most of those sources which form the basis of our knowledge of the life of Prophet (Ibn Hishām, al-Tabari, Ibn Sa‘d, etc.) pass in silence over Muhammad’s stop at Ghadir Khumm, or, if they mention it, say nothing of his discourse (the writers evidently feared to attract the hostility of the Sunnis, who were in power, by providing material for the polemic of the Shī‘is who used these words to support their thesis of ‘Ali’s right to the caliphate). Consequently, the western biographers of Muhammad, whose work is based on these sources, equally make no reference to what happened at Ghadir Khumm.

Then she writes:

“It is, however, certain that Muhammad did speak in this place and utter the famous sentence, for the account of this event has been preserved, either in a concise form or in detail, not only by al-Ya‘kubi, whose sympathy for the ‘Alid cause is well known, but also in the collection of traditions which are considered canonical, especially in the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal; and the hadiths are so numerous and so well attested by the different *isnāds* that it does not seem possible to reject them.

Vaglieri continues, “Several of these hadiths are cited in the bibliography, but it does not include the hadīth which, although reporting the sentence, omit to name Ghadir Khumm, or those which state that the sentence was pronounced at al-Hudaybiya. The complete documentation will be facilitated when the *Concordance* of Wensinck have been completely published. In order to have an idea of how numerous these hadiths are, it is enough to glance at the pages in which Ibn Kathir has collected a great number of them with their *isnads*.”

(2) Justice (*‘adl*):

The Shī‘a school of Islamic thought values justice so highly that the belief in justice has become its hallmark in theological books.

The Shī‘as believe that justice must prevail and exist at all stages of existence. They believe that God is just in His dealing with mankind; that God does not compel anyone to believe or to disbelieve in Him; that God does not

compel human beings to do good or evil — it is entirely left upon them to make the right choice in light of the guidance provided by the prophets and messengers.

This belief in importance of justice permeates down to human level: the Shī‘as believe that the Prophet and the Imams who succeeded him must also uphold highest standard of justice; that even the religious leaders and prayer-leaders must be upright in their character.

Based on this emphasis of the concept of justice, Shī‘a Muslims are not permitted to co-operate or work with an unjust and tyrant ruler, and they are also expected to strive for a just social order in human society.

This is the underlying basis of the various Shī‘ī movements in history in which they have risen against the rulers and governments of their own times.

C. SUMMARY OF SHĪ‘A BELIEFS

In conclusion, a Muslim is one who believes in the following three principles

- Monotheism — *Tawhīd*.
- Prophethood — *Nubuwwa*.
- Life Hereafter — *Qiyāmat*.

1. A Shi‘a Muslim is the one who believes in the following five principles

- Monotheism — *Tawhīd*.
- Prophethood — *Nubuwwa*.
- Life Hereafter — *Qiyāmat*.
 - Justice — *‘Adl*.
- Leadership — *Imāmat*.

* * * * *

Prophet Abraham has been described in the Qur’ān by both names: “*muslim* – one who submits to God” (3:67) as well as “*shī‘a* –follower (of Prophet Noah)” (37:79-83)

See Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam* (London: Yale University Press, 1985) p. 282 that is somewhat outdated now. Also see the figures given by Yann Richard, *Shi‘ite Islam*, tr. Antonia Nevill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) p. 2-5. The figures in these two books have been modified with the information given in the latest versions of various encyclopaedias.

Most Muslim historians and commentators of the Qur’ān have quoted this event. See the following Sunni

sources: at-Tabari, *at-Ta'rikh*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1980 offset of the 1789 edition) p. 171-173; Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kamil*, vol. 5 (Beirut, 1965) p. 62-63; Abu 'l-Fidā', *al-Mukhtasar fi Ta'rikhi 'l-Bashar*, vol. 1 (Beirut, n.d.) p. 116-117; al-Khāzin, *at-Tafsir*, vol. 4 (Cairo, 1955) p. 127; al-Baghawi, *at-Tafsir (Ma'ālimu 't-Tanzil)*, vol. 6 (Riyadh: Dar Tayyiba, 1993) p. 131; al-Bayhaqi, *Dalā'ilu 'n-Nubuwwa*, vol. 1 (Cairo, 1969) p. 428-430; as-Suyuti, *ad-Durru 'l-Manthūr*, vol. 5 (Beirut, n.d.) p. 97; and Muttaqi al-Hindi, *Kanzu 'l-'Ummāl*, vol. 15 (Hyderabad, 1968) pp. 100, 113, 115. For further references, see 'Abdu 'l-Husayn al-Aminī, *al-Ghadir*, vol. 2 (Beirut, 1967) pp. 278-289.

In English see, Rizvi, S. Saeed Akhtar, *Imamate: the Vicegerency of the Prophet* (Tehran: WOFIS, 1985) pp. 57-60. For an elaborate discussion on the *isnād* and meaning of the Prophet's *hadīth* in this event, and also the variations in the early Sunni and Shi'a sources, see Dr. Sayyid Tālib Husayn ar-Rifā'ī, *Yawmu 'd-Dār* (Beirut: Dar al-Azwā', 1986).

For further discussion on the event of Ghadir Khumm, see the chapter "Ghadir Khumm & the Orientalists" of my *Shi'ism: Imamate & Wilayat*. For authenticity of this version of the hadīth (that is, "Book of Allāh and my progeny" as opposed to "Book of Allāh and my *sunnah*"), see the Sunni author, Hasan bin 'Ali as-Saqqāf, "The Book of Allāh and What Else?" *The Right Path*, vol. 6 (# 3 & 4 Oct-Dec 1997) p. 44-49.

EI2, p. 993 under "Ghadir Khumm".

EI2, p. 993 under "Ghadir Khumm".