

‘Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 661)

The cousin of the Prophet Muhammad and husband of his daughter Fatima, ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 661) was the first male to embrace Islam and was renowned for his loyalty to the Prophet and his courageous role in a number of the military expeditions in the defense of the early Muslim community. Muslim sources, especially Shia ones, state that ‘Ali was the only person born in the Ka’ba sanctuary in Mecca, the holiest place in Islam. ‘Ali is also known for his piety, profound knowledge of the Qur'an and the *sunna* (the practices of the Prophet).

Ali’s contribution to Prophet’s cause are well known. When Muhammad decided to migrate to Yathrib, his escape was facilitated by 'Ali, who slept in his bed making people believe that the Prophet was at home. During Muhammad’s time, ‘Ali was very active in his service, leading parties of warriors in battles. ‘Ali took part in the early caravan raids from Mecca and later in almost all the battles fought by the nascent Muslim community. He was a key figure in the battle of Badr and received sixteen wounds at Uhud. On the day when Khaibar was stormed he carried the banner.

For 24 years after Muhammad’s death in 632, ‘Ali neither took part in any battle or conquest, nor did he assume any administrative position. He withdrew from political affairs, and worked as a farmer, dug a lot of wells and planted gardens near Medina and endowed them for public use. These wells are known today as Abar ‘Ali (‘Ali's wells").

Although ‘Ali's name was mentioned among those who could succeed Muhammad, he was only accepted as the leader of the community when ‘Uthman, the third caliph, was murdered in 656. At first ‘Ali refused to accept power, but five days later he agreed. On June 24, 656 allegiance was paid to him as Caliph in Medina; he was the first to ascend the pulpit for this ceremony.

After coming to power, ‘Ali revamped the social security system that had been recently instituted by his predecessors. Under ‘Ali, all citizens, regardless of their ethnic or tribal background, were given an equal amount from the public treasury. During his five and half year reign, ‘Ali was involved in three civil wars. First ‘A’isha, the wife of the Prophet, led a revolt against him in Basra. Then, Mu’awiya fought against him in Syria for failing to avenge ‘Uthman’s murder. Finally, the Kharijis, who were at one time his followers, fought him believing him to be a non-believer. This was a fanatical movement that had vowed to kill anyone who did not share their parochial and extremist vision. Finally, in 661, during the month of Ramadhan, ‘Ali was assassinated by a Khariji, ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Muljam, while praying in the mosque in Kufa. He left no gold or silver behind even though he was the ruler of the Islamic empire.

‘Ali is also respected as a writer and religious authority. A numerous range of disciplines from theology and exegesis to calligraphy and numerology, from law and mysticism to Arabic grammar and rhetoric are regarded as having been first adumbrated by ‘Ali. According to a statement narrated by many Muslim scholars, Muhammad is reported to have said "I'm the city of knowledge and ‘Ali is its gate.

His followers, called Shi’is “the partisans of ‘Ali” believe that on the Prophet’s death the temporal and spiritual leadership of the Muslim community should have devolved to ‘Ali but was instead usurped by other close companions of the Prophet. For them, ‘Ali was the first of the twelve divinely guided Imams. After ‘Ali's death, his direct descendants inherited the imamate, although few were able to exercise political authority due to persecution by Sunni rulers.

‘Ali is said to have been very pious, and an ascetic who led a poverty stricken lifestyle. Shi‘i biographical literature contains copious reports on his devotional worship, meditation, and acts of self-denial and control. For example, in a sermon recorded in the *Nahj al-Balagha*, a book that contains his sermons and letters, ‘Ali engages in a lengthy description of the attributes of the pious ones. Reflecting on their exalted stations he states, “They see what others cannot see and they hear what others do not hear. They have access to divine secrets.”

‘Ali’s miraculous feats are also recorded in Shi‘i hagiographic literature. He had reportedly dictated the *‘ilm al-balaya wa’l-manaya* (esoteric knowledge on future events) to Rushayd al-Hujri a close confidant. In addition, he taught Salman al-Farisi the greatest name of God. This enabled him to partake in the Imams’ esoteric knowledge. ‘Ali reportedly made the sun revert to an earlier position in the sky on two occasions, during and after the time of the Prophet.

Besides the Shi‘is, the Sufis (mystics of Islam) also hold ‘Ali in high esteem. They often trace the authority of their holy men and, in turn, the holy men’s shaykhs, in a concatenated chain culminating in the Prophet and finally to God. Many of these genealogies are traced to the Prophet through ‘Ali, an important figure in the Sufi spiritual chain. Just like the Shi‘is, Sufis see ‘Ali as the recipient of esoteric knowledge and the inheritor of the divine light located in the Prophet. Sufis feel a sentimental allegiance to the family of the Prophet without explicitly accepting the Shi‘i doctrine of the imamate.

Some exaggerators (*ghulat*) believe that God had become incarnate in the person of the ‘Ali by “indwelling” (*hulul*). The best known of these sects is that of the Nusairi, who regard him as the first of the three persons of the Trinity

For the Sunnis, ‘Ali was a close follower and confidant of the Prophet. They accept him

as the fourth of the rightly guided caliphs and respect him for his courage, knowledge, belief, honesty, unbending devotion to Islam, deep loyalty to Muhammad, equal treatment of all Muslims and generosity in forgiving his defeated enemies. They do not accept the extraordinary qualities that Shi'is attribute to him.

Further Reading:

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