

Tarikh  
Series #1

# Companions Of The Imams

By:

*Dr. Liyakatali N. Takim*

## RESOURCE PAPER

The Resource Paper Series is designed to provide materials to facilitate the implementation of the curriculum outlined in the Curriculum Development Process (CDP) Report.

**Imam as-Sadiq (a) himself encouraged his companions to narrate traditions.**

*He said:*

"We do not consider a faqih (jurist) amongst them [the Shi'as] to be a faqih until he is [also] a narrator [of our traditions]"

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# **Companions of the Imams**

*By: Dr. Liyakatali N. Takim*

**“The Position of My Ahlul-Bayt Amongst  
My Ummah Is Similar To Noah's Ark:  
*Those Who Embarked It Were Rescued  
And Those Who Rejected It Perished”***

**Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAWW)**

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# **COMPANIONS OF THE IMAMS**

By Dr. Liyakatali N. Takim

## **Link to the Tarikh Framework**

The goal of human conduct on earth is the establishment of a just social order. There are many verses in the Qur'an exhorting human beings to establish justice on earth (e.g., 4:125, 5:42). It is due to this that the Qur'an states that Prophets came with scales (57:25), a metaphor for justice. Thus the Prophets and Imams were sent to establish a model society, based on justice and equity that others could emulate.

Historically, there were times when, due to political difficulties coupled with limited means of communication, the Imams could not disseminate and/or implement their teachings for this Islamic ideal to be realized. The companions, also known as rijal, stepped forward and performed some of these duties under the authority of the Imams. To the extent possible, the Shi'a, in fact, established a community within a community. So it is that, within this narrow sector of society, moral uprightness and equity was upheld.

## Objectives of the Resource Paper

The objectives of the paper are two-fold:

- To describe and explain the importance of the different functions performed by the companions of the Imams.
- To evaluate the short and long-term effects of the companions' role, that is, their impact on their own communities and on future generations.

The following were some of the functions performed by the companions of the Imams.

### 1. Acknowledgement and proclamation of the Imamate of a succeeding Imam

**Description:** An important function of the disciples reported in our sources was their proclamation of an Imam's true successor after his death. The Imams could not publicly designate their successors due to the difficult political circumstances. The significance of this role becomes more evident when it is remembered that after Imam al-Sadiq (a), most Imams had to contend with rival claimants to the Imamate. Kulayni, for example, cites a report that indicates how two disciples of Imam al-as-Sadiq (a), al-Jawaliqi and al-Ahwal, were eventually guided to Imam al-Kazim (a) after his father's death. Initially, they had questioned 'Abd Allah, Imam as-Sadiq's (a) eldest son. 'Abd Allah had claimed to be the Imam after his father's death. When 'Abd Allah failed to answer their questions on zakat, they abandoned him. Similarly, after the wafat of Imam al-Kazim (a), many

Shi‘as believed that he was the Mahdi. The rijal led to the acknowledgement of the Imamate of the Eighth Imam.

Furthermore, Shi‘as living in remote places also faced the threat of the ghulat (exaggerators) many of whom advanced exaggerated beliefs in the Imams and themselves. Thus, Abu'l-Khattab claimed that Imam as-Sadiq (a) was god and that he (Abu'l-Khattab) was the prophet of god. It was left to the rijal to nullify such false claims. These ghulat often invented hadith and attributed them to the Imams.

**Analysis:** Due to his close proximity to an Imam, a disciple's acknowledgement of the succeeding Imam was closely examined by the Shi‘as in their search for the identity of the correct Imam. The associates of the Imams were instrumental in the allegiance paid to the Imams. By their acknowledgement of an Imam, the disciples of the Imams guided the Shi‘is to the correct source of authority and refuted claims made by false contenders. The above anecdote leads us to understand an important dimension that connected the Imams and their followers. The ‘ilm of an Imam was an important criterion in the acknowledgement of his Imamate for it was this factor which was seen as the sole basis for legitimising any claim to the Imamate. The failure of ‘Abd Allah to satisfactorily answer the questions posed led Shi‘is like al-Jawaliqi to Imam al-Kazim (a) who substantiated his claim to Imamate by displaying his knowledge in fiqh. This also proves our belief that the Imams had ‘ilm that was bestowed by Allah (swt). As Imam al-Baqir (a) said: “Travel to the east or west, you will not find true knowledge except that which is coming from this house (Ahlul-bayt) only”.

## 2. Narrating Traditions

**Description:** Our rituals and ethical precepts are based mainly on the Qur'an and hadith (traditions reported from the Prophet and Imams). Indeed, it is correct to say that the teachings of our Imams are transmitted in the form of hadith. Without the hadith, we could not have known of the practices (sunna) of the Prophet (s) or the Imams (a). Our hadith literature is centred mainly on Imams al-Baqir and as-Sadiq (a). According to al-Mufid, four thousand reporters narrated hadith from Imam as-Sadiq (a). Najashi notes that al-Hasan b. 'Ali al-Washsha had met 900 reporters in the mosque of Kufa, each of whom was saying, "Ja'far b. Muhammad has related to me..." Imam as-Sadiq (a) himself encouraged his companions to narrate traditions. He said:

"We do not consider a faqih (jurist) amongst them [the Shi'as] to be a faqih until he is [also] a narrator [of our traditions]"

The disciples of the Imams heard and recorded traditions of the Imams in their lifetimes. In fact, they are reported to have transmitted thousands of traditions from the Imams. Thus, Muhammad b. Muslim is reported to have heard over 30,000 traditions from Imam al-Baqir (a) whereas Jabir al-Ju'fi had heard over 70,000 from the same Imam. Many of the books that contained these traditions were lost when Shi'i libraries were burnt especially during the time of Shaykh Tusi in 1055 A.D. However, some of these traditions were preserved and are reported in their books by the likes of Kulayni, Shaykh Saduq and Tusi.

**Analysis:** The significance attached to the role played by the disciples of the Imams in this sphere can be fully comprehended only when it is viewed in the wider context

of various reports on hadith fabrication. Starting with Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (a) (d. 95/713-4), every Imam had an adversary who would distort or falsify his traditions. Mughira Sa'id (d. 119/737), an extremist, is charged with interpolating Imam al-Baqir's (a) traditions. Similarly, Abu'l Khattab is accused of distorting Imam as-Sadiq's (a) traditions. Yunus b. Abd al-Rahman had apparently recorded Shi'a traditions in Kufa. When he returned to Medina, he presented these to Imam ar-Ridha (a). The Imam denied that these were uttered by Imams as-Sadiq or al-Kazim and blamed Abu'l Khattab and his companions for fabricating their hadiths. Such reports of fabrication of traditions increased the importance of the rijal as the preservers of hadith against falsification. In their roles as narrators of traditions, the rijal were the protectors of religion since they preserved traditions that could have been lost or fabricated by other figures.

The role of the rijal as traditionalists is also to be assessed within the context of rise of the rival factions for the Imamate. By reporting traditions, the rijal were not only informing the Shi'as of the correct religious practices but they were also exposing false claimants to the Imamate. Moreover, by reporting traditions, the correct successor to the Imam could be identified and the community's religious beliefs and practices are standardised. Furthermore, the threat from the ghulat (mentioned above) could be neutralised.

The disciples also identified the variant factions with extremist, peripheral and hence isolated beliefs. The rijal represented the Shi'i 'norm' through which the correct views could be differentiated from those promulgated by the enemies of the Ahlul-bayt.

### 3. Polemical Discourses

**Description:** Shi‘a beliefs in the Imamate, knowledge and isma (infallibility) of the Imams had to be defended for the Shi‘as were continuously challenged regarding their beliefs. To justify their theological views, the companions of the Imams employed theological methods of discussion (as opposed to restricting themselves to mere narration of traditions) discussing and justifying questions such as the creation of the Qur’an, anthropomorphism (whether God has bodily parts), the nature and extent of God’s ‘ilm, free will and predestination, the infallibility of the Prophets and Imams etc.

During the times of the Imams there was a successive line of prominent Shi‘i theologians who defended Shi‘i beliefs forming, thereby, a structured chain of theologians. Fadl b. Shadhan, the companion of the eleventh Imam (a) said:

"I am the successor of those before me. I met Muhammad b. Abi ‘Umayr and Safwan b. Yahya and others [besides them] and I was associated with them for fifty years. And [as for] Hisham b. al-Hakam may God have mercy on him, he died and Yunus b. Abd al-Rahman, may God have mercy on him, succeeded him. He refuted our opponents. When Yunus died, he did not leave a successor apart from as-Sakkak, and he refuted our opponents until he, may God have mercy on him, died and I am their successor".

The tradition indicates the emergence of a structure of prominent rijal who defended Shi‘i doctrines within the community. It is also to be noted that most of those mentioned were leading Shi‘i theologians of their times.

According to al-Tabarsi, the polemical function of the rijal could be traced to the activities of the Imams themselves. All the Imams set precedents for their associates by arguing on various theological issues with their rivals. In his *al-Ihtijaj*, al-Tabarsi quotes every Imam as having had lengthy sessions with his adversaries on questions like tawhid, Imamate etc. The rijal and all later theologians were merely following the sunna of the Imams in their polemical roles.

Besides arguing for various doctrines, Shi'i sources suggest that the disciples had specialised in different fields. Aban b. Taghlib was an expert in Arabic grammar, Zurara in fiqh, al-Ahwal in kalam (theology), al-Tayyar in istita'a (ability to perform an act), al-Jawaliqi in tawhid and Hisham b. al-Hakam on the Imamate. 'Ali b. Maytham Tammar also had discussions with the Mu'tazili 'Ali al-Aswari on the Imamate. The rijal were encouraged by the Imams to argue on various theological issues on their behalf. Thus Kulayni notes how a Syrian debated with many rijal in Imam as-Sadiq's (a) presence, all of whom overcame him in his arguments.

**Analysis:** In contrast to the other roles that have so far been discussed, the polemical discourses by the rijal were directed mainly at their opponents. Other Muslim groups were discussing issues like Allah's attributes, the creation of the Qur'an, freewill and predestination, etc. The Imams formulated the Shi'a response; the rijal expressed the views of the Imams in their discourses. Moreover, the Shi'as had to be equipped with answers to questions regarding the Imams. Thus our beliefs that the Imams were divinely appointed, the need for an Imam at all times, the nature and extent of the 'ilm of the Imams and their infallibility were expressed in the arguments of the rijal.

Through their polemical discourses, the companions of the Imams also set precedents for later scholars. Thus Shaykh Mufid, Tusi, Sharif al-Murtada and Alama Hilli also used many arguments cited by the rijal to defend Shi'a beliefs.

The motive for the disputations was to demonstrate that the origins of the Shi'a community was divinely sanctioned. The rijal, in their role as the representatives of the Imams, were expressing the legitimate and correct beliefs. In the process, they were neutralising the arguments of their opponents.

In a sense, in their polemical role, the rijal were performing the function that had been envisaged by the Prophet (s). Not only were they the bearers of the Imam's 'ilm, but they also became, through their polemical role, the "nullifiers of the claims of invalid interpreters and repudiators of the deviators of the extremists."

#### **4. Literary Works**

**Description:** Another important function of the rijal was that of the composition of a wide range of literary works. The associates of the Imams wrote on diverse theological, jurisprudential, historical and ethical issues. It is common to find their compositions on issues like zuhd (abstention from worldly affairs), ethics and tafsir of the Qur'an, etc. In many ways, the literary function of the disciples was an extension of their polemical function since their written works had polemical connotations. Theologians like al-Ahwal and Hisham had refuted views held by their adversaries. At-Tammar had written a book on the Imamate whereas others had refuted the ghulat (extremists), Zaydis (a Shi'i sub-sect) and the Mu'tazilis (those who believed in the supremacy of reasoning) in

their books. In some cases, the disciples posed questions to the Imams and recorded their answers. Safwan b. Yahya (d. 210/825), an eminent associate of the eighth and ninth Imams, composed a book on the questions asked from Imam al-Kazim (a). Fadl b. Shadhan is reported to have been the author of 180 books.

The Imams themselves also encouraged the literary function of the rijal. Kulayni cites a report in which Imam as-Sadiq (a) is quoted as actively encouraging Muffadal b. 'Umar to compose books. He said:

"Preserve and disseminate your knowledge amongst your brothers, and, when you die, bequeath your books to your sons, for there will come to the people a time at which there will be [so much] confusion that they will not get close to religion except through their books".

**Analysis:** Literary activity was an important tool in spreading the teachings of the Imams. A report in Tusi's *Tahdhib* indicates how the Imams used written texts to train their associates. Imam al-Baqir (a) read with Muhammad b. Muslim a copy of the *Kitab al-Fara'id* which was dictated to Imam 'Ali (a) by the Prophet (s). This method of transmission of the Imam's 'ilm was an expression of great confidence in Muhammad since only the most trustworthy could be shown previous scrolls. The tradition then indicates how this 'ilm, acquired from the Imam, was transmitted to the Shi'i community. As it states, "Muhammad cited injunctions pertaining to the laws of inheritance based on the teachings of the Imam in the book". Some books were presented by the disciples to the Imams to authenticate. Once verified by an Imam, a book forms an important mode for transmitting the

teachings of the Imam and becomes a part of the Imam's sunna. Thus, the book of 'Ubayd Allah b. 'Ali al-Halabi was approved by Imam as-Sadiq (a).

A distinctive feature of second century Shi'i literary works was the four hundred *usul* works (*al-usul al-arba'ū mi'a*). *Usul* works were those books that were reported directly from an Imam without an intermediary. The authors of the *usul* works enjoyed higher prestige in the eyes of the Shi'is as they were seen as reflecting the Imams exact sayings and transmitting their teachings. The subjects covered in these works ranged from legal and ritual issues to ethical maxims. The literary activities of the *rijal*, especially the authors of the *usul* works and those works authenticated by the Imams, are a further indication of the importance attached to the *rijal*'s role as authoritative links in the chain of transmission of the Imam's 'ilm.

Amongst the *usul* works, of particular importance is the *K. al-Diyyat* of Zarih al-Nasih, a work which was partly copied by Kulayni and incorporated in its entirety by Shaykh Saduq and Tusi their works. This work is a classic example of how previous literature was used by post-ghayba jurists in their juridical works.

## 5. Jurists

**Description:** Apart from the foregoing roles, the disciples also acted as jurists within the community. It is not uncommon for a disciple to be described as a *faqih* (jurist) or to have composed works in Islamic law. Thus, in his *Kitab al-Fihrist*, Ibn al-Nadim enumerates several prominent Shi'i *rijal* and then says, "These are *fuqaha* (jurists) who relate *fiqh* from the Imams". Many disciples

were seen as experts in the ahkam Allah (God's legal ordinances).

Many of the disciples would study under the Imams especially in Medina. The afore-mentioned Muhammad b. Muslim had moved from Kufa to Medina and had studied under Imam al-Baqir (a) for four years. The Imams would then appoint them as religious leaders in the community. Thus when the Shi'is of Kufa approached Imam as-Sadiq (a) after the uprising of the extremist Abu'l Khattab and urged him to appoint someone whom they could refer to in matters pertaining to religious guidance, he said:

Mufaddal b. 'Umar, listen to him and associate [yourselves] with him, for he does not say [anything] about God and me except that which is the truth".

It was in statements such as this that the Imams appointed religious authorities who could furnish religious guidance to the distant Shi'as.

**Analysis:** The role of the companions as jurists appears to have evolved mainly due to the socio-political conditions of the times. Many distant followers of the Imams are quoted as requesting the Imams to appoint for them someone whom they could consult in religious affairs. The juridical role of the rijal was the result of the Imams' concern to furnish their followers with guidance especially in matters that pertain to Islamic law. The significance of this role can be discerned from the fact that, according to Kashshi, upto the time of Imam al-Baqir (a) many Shi'is were not aware of some basic halal and haram issues.

The role of the rijal as the jurists of the times is also a response to many Orientalists who maintain that Shi'i law

evolved after the ghayba period. On the contrary, the existence of a distinctive Shi'a law during the times of the Imams is evident even in Sunni sources.

## 6. Adjudicators in Disputes

**Description:** The rijal were also authorised by the Imams to resolve disputes within the Shi'a community. An important tradition cited in *al-Kafi* illustrates how Imam as-Sadiq (a) is reported to have envisaged the role of the rijal as the arbitrators of disputes within the community. The famous tradition reported by 'Umar b. al-Hanzala is in the form of a question posed by him to the Imam. "What should be done in the case of two of our companions who are in dispute over a debt or inheritance"? The Imam replied, "He should seek one amongst you who narrates our traditions and who is well versed in the halal and haram. If he judges according to our rulings and [someone] does not accept [them], he has indeed deemed light (istakhaffa) God's laws and has rejected us".

**Analysis:** The maqbula (as the tradition came to be called) endorses the appointment of Shi'i jurists as the deputy of the Imams to execute justice and commands. The Shi'is were forbidden in the maqbula to resort to judges appointed by the government for, "Whoever does that has resorted to rulings issued by the tyrannical state". As the true authority rested with the Imam, any adjudication by a profane power was not only illegitimate but also contrary to the Imam's explicit delegation of this office to his associates.

The Shi'is constituted a community within a community especially in their relations with the *de facto* regime. Not only do our sources suggest they had their own distinct

juridical and theological stances, but they also resorted to their own qualified jurists whose authority was sanctioned by the Imam rather than the Caliph. The ideal Shi'i community coexisted with the real, i.e., a distinct community which had its own ritual practices, accepted the authority of a separate divinely appointed leader and transmitted its own legal and theological traditions was to exist in the midst of a hostile majority. As the ideal could not be actualised, it was to exist within the real.

## Evaluation

The discussion of the various roles of the rijal indicates that within each field, their most important function was seen in terms of upholding the central belief in the Imamate and other related beliefs. The companions contribution was always measured by performing some function on behalf the Imams like justifying Shi'i beliefs or disseminating their teachings on Islamic law. Significantly, when the Imams' authority was not widely recognised by the Shi'a community (due to the adverse political circumstances), the rijal proclaimed their Imamate and led others to do the same.

The contribution of the disciples had both short and long term impact. In the short run, they were able to provide religious guidance to the Shi'as of their own times and to disseminate the teachings of the Imams. They were also able to defeat the arguments of their adversaries hence establishing a standard of correct beliefs and practices. They also functioned like leaders to the community on behalf of the Imams, acting as arbiters and frequently collecting the religious dues (zakat and khumus) on behalf of the Imams.

In the long run, the books they compiled and arguments they used to defend Shi'a beliefs and practices were used by post-ghayba (after 945 A.D.) Shi'a scholars in their own compilations. Without the contribution of the disciples, much of the teachings of the Imams may not have reached us. Moreover, the rijal established models for later scholars i.e., in the absence of the Imams, it was the scholars who would fill the important position of the leadership of the community until the re-appearance of the Twelfth Imam (a). They showed that in the absence of the

Imams, the community had to be actively led by the 'ulama in various capacities, for according to a very famous prophetic hadith, they were the inheritors of the knowledge of the Prophets. Thus post-ghayba scholars could look back at the practices of the rijal of the Imams who also performed various activities on behalf of the Imams to the Shi'a community. Through their literary, juridical and polemical activities, the companions of the Imams also transmitted the religious tradition that would shape the beliefs and ritual practices of the post-ghayba Shi'i community.

## Deduction

The historical lives of the companions of the Imams provide many lessons that we can collectively benefit from. The rijal showed great loyalty to the Imams. Loyalty was measured by correct belief and upright actions. It is due to their loyalty that disciples such as Zurara, Burayd, Abu Basir and Muhammad b. Muslim were referred to as the tent pegs of religion by Imam as-Sadiq (a). If the pegs are removed, the foundation collapses.

Despite the danger to their lives, they would act on behalf of the Imams, spreading their teachings and collecting the khumus. A good example is 'Ali b. Yaqtin. Although his activities were closely monitored by the tyrannical Caliph Harun al-Rashid, he was faithful to Imam al-Kazim (a) and would serve the Shi'as of his time.

The rijal also acted as role models in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. Not only are we to acquire knowledge, we are then required to disseminate it to others. Once you graduate from the madrasah, please pass on your knowledge to younger students. In this way, you will be following the example of the rijal, bequeathing the traditions and knowledge of the Imams.

The rijal also demonstrate to us that we must be able to defend our beliefs and practices. In contemporary times, we Shi'as are frequently challenged about our beliefs in the Imams, our different practices (e.g. using the mohr when praying, not folding our hands in prayers, combining the dhuhr and 'asr prayers etc). We can only defend our beliefs and practices when we have acquired the knowledge for it.

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## NOTES

# RESOURCE PAPER

## *Companions Of The Imams*

**Due to the difficult socio-political conditions of the times, the Imams often encouraged their close disciples (rijal) to undertake some of their functions in the Muslim community. This paper examines some of the functions that the rijal performed on behalf of the Imams. The paper also discusses the ramifications of their various roles including the accentuation of their authoritative status within the community.**

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