Imam Ali bin Abu Talib (A.S.), His Life, Achievements, and Merits

<"xml encoding="UTF-8?>

Ali bin Abu Talib (A.S.) was the cousin and son-in-Law of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.). It is outside the scope of this presentation to record the numerous achievements and merits of Imam Ali (A.S.). His exalted personality is such that even the most learned scholars are at a .loss to fathom his greatness

His birth:

The miraculous circumstance of Imam Ali's birth gives us an indication of his unique position in relation to Allah (SWT). Imam Ali was born in 600 A.D., on the 13th of Rajab, within the holy precincts of the Kaba, the house of Allah in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. His mother, Fatima binte Asad, experienced labor pains and walked towards the Holy Kaba. Its wall miraculously split, she entered the sanctuary, and the gap sealed itself behind her.

Onlookers panicked and rushed to enter it, but could not unlock the door. She emerged three days later, after the baby was born. The Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) was the first person besides Ali's mother to hold the newborn in his arms, and when Ali opened his eyes, it was the face of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) that he first saw. In the history of the Kaba, this is the only known .instance of a person being born within its holy precincts

His ancestry:

Ali's father was Hazrat Abu Talib, the chief of the Hashemite tribe and an uncle of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.). Thus, both of Imam Ali's parents were of noble ancestry, belonging to the .tribe of Banu Hashim

His early life:

When Imam Ali was five years old, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) took him under his care in order to ease the financial burden on his uncle Abu Talib, as well as to repay him for the favors he had received from Abu Talib. Imam Ali later said that he was attached to the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) like a baby camel attached to its mother. When the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) received his ministry, Imam Ali was the first male to accept his invitation to Islam. According to his own account he prayed with the Prophet (S.A.W.) for several years before the Prophet openly .proclaimed his mission

Ali slept on the Prophet's bed:

The idol worshippers of Mecca had plotted to kill Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) in order to prevent his message of monotheism from spreading. The Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) was informed by Allah (SWT) of the plot, and decided to make Hijra (migration), for the sake of Allah (SWT) to the city of Medina, so as to carry on his mission.

He asked Imam Ali, his young cousin, to sleep in his bed in order to distract and confuse the assassins and allow him time to escape. Imam Ali gladly accepted this responsibility, risking his life so that the Prophet's life would be saved. Imam Ali slept soundly, surrounded by the drawn swords of the Prophet's blood-thirsty enemies.

When asked later on in what state he had spent that night, Imam Ali replied that he had never slept so peacefully before in his life! Allah was so pleased with this exemplary act of sacrifice that He revealed the following verse of the Qur'an: "And there is the type of man who gives his life to earn the pleasure of Allah; and Allah is full of kindness to (His) servants." (2:207)

The renowned historian Jalaluddin Suyuti writes in Tarikh al-Khulafa, or The History of the Caliphs, on the authority of Hazrat Ibn Abbas, that in the Qur'an, three hundred verses have been revealed concerning, and in praise of, Ali. Scholars, historians, and leaders of all faiths and beliefs the world over have written extensively on the merits of Imam Ali.

Two landmark events.

During the ministry of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.), two events in particular shed light on the unique distinction and position of Imam Ali. One occurred at the very beginning of the Holy Prophet's (S.A.W.) mission, and the other was near the end of the Prophet's life.

The Feast of Dhul 'Asheera.

In the fourth year of his ministry, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) was instructed through the Qur'anic revelation to warn his near relatives and proclaim to them the oneness of Allah (SWT), to let them know his own position as the last messenger of Allah (SWT), and to invite them to Islam. The verse begins: "And warn thy nearest kinsfolk." (26:214).

He invited the respected elders of the Quraish tribe to a well-prepared feast, and afterwards invited them to Islam. He furthermore announced that the first among them to accept his message and be his aide and helper in his prophetic mission would become his heir and successor. Those who were present sat in silence.

Imam Ali, then a young teenager, stood up and declared that he would accept the Holy Prophet's (S.A.W.) message and be his helper. Twice, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) asked Imam Ali to sit down, and then invited any of the others, but to no avail. At the third appeal, Imam Ali

stood up again and boldly volunteered to take the responsibility. This time the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) smilingly declared Ali to be his successor and helper. In the words of the famous historian, John Devonport, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) threw his arms around the courageous youth, and pressed him to his bosom, declaring, “Behold, my brother, executor of my will, and my successor! All of you should listen to him and obey him.” Those in attendance laughed and ridiculed the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.), and furthermore taunted Abu Talib by saying that he had just been commanded to listen to and obey his own son. Yet, true to his word, Imam Ali protected, defended, and followed the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) like a shadow, shielding him from enemies and being ever-ready to give his life in the service of .Islam. Whenever others deserted the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.), Imam Ali remained with him

The event of Ghadir-e-Khum.

In the 10th year after Hijra, when the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) was returning from his last Hajj, known as the Farewell Pilgrimage, he received this revelation brought by the Angel Gabriel at a valley known as Ghadir-e-Khum: “O Apostle! Proclaim that (message) which hath been sent down to thee from thy Lord. If thou did not, thou wouldst not have fulfilled and proclaimed His (entire) message! And Allah will defend thee from the mischief of men, for Allah guideth not those who reject faith.” (5:70).

Upon receiving this verse from Allah (SWT), the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) immediately halted the journey and called back all those who had gone ahead, and waited for those still behind. He then delivered what is known as “the Last Sermon.” He forewarned that his end was near, and recounted his services to the Muslims, their duties to Allah (SWT), and their obligations to one another.

Towards the end of this sermon, he asked, “The Almighty Allah is my Maula (master) and the Maula of all those who believe, and I am similarly the Maula of all those who believe, and I have more right over the believers’ lives than they have on their own selves; do you believe in this claim?” All of them replied in one voice, “Yes, O Messenger of Allah!” Twice more he asked this question, and twice more he received the same reply.

At this point, he solemnly declared, “Then hear and remember: of whomsoever I am the Maula, this Ali is also his Maula! He is to me what Aaron was to Moses. O Allah! Be a friend to him who befriends him and enemy to him who opposes him! Help those who help him and frustrate those who frustrate him!” While he was saying these words, he raised Imam Ali in his arms above his head so that all those in the gathering may have a look at the man who was to be their Maula.

Thereupon, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) received this final revelation of the Qur’an from Allah

(SWT): “This day have I perfected your religion for you, and completed My favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion!” (5:3).

After this, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) had a tent erected, and inside this tent Imam Ali was seated, so that people could enter and pay homage to him and address him as Ameer-ul-mu’mineen (Commander of the Faithful). History records that the first person to congratulate and address him was Umar ibn al-Khattab who said, “Congratulations, O son of Abu Talib! Today you have become my Maula and the Maula of every believing man and woman.” (This particular event has been recorded in Imam Ahmed ibn Hanbal’s Musnad, v. 5, p. 281, and Imam al-Ghazzali’s Sir-ul-Alameen. Maulana Askari Ja'fari states that 153 famous authors have recorded the event of Ghadir-e-Khum in their works.)

Statements of prominent scholars regarding Imam Ali (A.S.):

Ibn Abil Hadid, the well-known Egyptian commentator on the book Nahj al-Balagha (The Peak of Eloquence), says that Ali had a personality in which opposing characteristics had so gathered themselves that it was difficult to believe that such a combination could manifest itself in a human being. He was the bravest man and boldest warrior that history could cite, and while such brave persons are almost always hard-hearted, cruel, and blood-thirsty, instead Ali was kind, sympathetic, responsive, and a warm-hearted person.

These are the qualities of one who is pious and God-fearing. He was friendly with the rich, poor, educated, and ignorant alike. He had a tender spot in his heart for every downtrodden, crippled, widowed, or orphaned person. He was always seen smiling and giving happy greetings, and was known to be very witty and could not be overcome in debate.

Once, in a discussion about Imam Ali, Abdullah ibn Ahmed ibn Hanbal made the remark that the seat of the Caliphate did not bring any honor and glory to Ali, but was itself honored and glorified because of Ali.

Allama Askari Ja'fari adds: “The world cannot quote an example, other than that of Ali, who was a first-class warrior and marshal, a philosopher and moralist, and a great teacher of religious principles and theology. The study of his life shows that his sword was the only help which Islam received during its early days of struggle and wars of self-defense. For Islam, he was the first line of defense, the second line of defense, and the last line of defense.”

Imam Ali on the battlefield

The Battle of Badr:

This battle alone provides an adequate example of Ali’s courage, valor, and unmatched fighting skills. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that he alone was responsible for the victory in that

battle. This battle took place in the month of Ramadan, 2 A.H., 624 A.D. About 1,000 Meccan Quraish warriors challenged some 313 ill-prepared and poorly equipped Muslims; the gross mismatch was obvious.

In the ensuing battle, Imam Ali (A.S.) killed several famous Arab warriors, sending a wave of fear through the enemy ranks and dashing their hopes of victory. The Meccan army retreated in shameful defeat. A total of 70 of the enemy soldiers had been killed and 36 of them had fallen to Ali's sword.

The Battle of Uhud:

This battle took place in the following year. The Quraish of Mecca mobilized a large army and returned to avenge their defeat at the hands of the Muslims. Initially, the Muslims were victorious. However, due to the greed and disobedience of some of the Muslim soldiers, who abandoned their posts and ran to collect the spoils of war,

the enemy had time to regroup and launch a new offensive, overpowering the defensive lines of the Muslim army. Panic ensued as there was a cry that "Muhammad is dead!" Upon hearing these cries, even more of the Muslims fled the battlefield in confusion and fear. Only four faithful and brave soldiers and companions of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) remained by his side to protect him. They were Ali, Hamza, Abu Dujana, and Zakwan. At one point Ali alone was defending the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.).

Ali beckoned to the Muslims that the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) was alive, and to return to their duty. Thereafter, the Muslims regrouped and defeated the enemy. Imam Ali killed 28 renowned Arab warriors and received 16 wounds. The Prophet himself was injured. Had it not been for Ali, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) would have been killed.

Later on, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) informed the Muslims that Angel Gabriel was there on the battlefield, loudly praising Ali with these words: "There is no braver youth than Ali, and there is no better sword than Zulfiqar!" (The name given to Ali's famous two-pronged sword). This is event is recorded in Waqudi's "History of the Prophets," and in Tabari's "Tarikh."

The Battle of the Trench (Ahzab):

In the 5th year after Hijra, the Meccans returned with 10,000 soldiers, determined once and for all to wipe out Islam. The Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) ordered that a trench be dug around the camp of the Muslim army, in order to protect his small force of 2,000 fighters. In command of the Meccan army was Amr ibn Abdul-Wudh, a fierce and mighty warrior who was as renowned and feared in Arabia as equal to the great Persian warrior Rustum. He and several of his brave companions managed to jump their horses across the trench and challenged the Muslims to

hand-to-hand combat.

One by one, Amr called out the names of some of the most well-known individuals and companions of the Prophet in the Muslim camp and challenged them to duel, but they did not respond, being frozen by fear. Only Imam Ali stood up with the will and resolve to accept Amr's challenge. But the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) did not allow him to fight. Finally, Amr taunted the Muslims collectively, and the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) in particular, as cowards unwilling to put their faith to the test.

He threw a spear directly at the tent of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) which pierced his tent. Ali was finally granted permission by the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) to go out and fight Amr. The Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) declared, as he sent Ali out to fight, "Today, faith in embodiment is facing infidelity in embodiment.

" Many of the Muslims, thinking that Ali was no match for Amr, came out to look at Ali's face for the last time. In the ensuing duel however, Ali killed Amr as well as two other renowned enemy warriors. The remaining ones who had jumped the trench fled back to their own ranks. The Meccans besieged the Muslim camp for several days and finally retreated from the battlefield due to dwindling supplies, adverse weather, and low morale.

Thus, it was Imam Ali alone who was responsible for demolishing the morale of the enemy and securing victory for the Muslim warriors.

The Battle of Khyber:

In the 7th year after Hijra, the Muslims marched against the rebellious Jewish clan which was holding the fortress of Khyber. On two successive days the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) sent the Muslim army under the leadership of a different commander from among his Sahaba, but in both instances the Muslims came back defeated.

Al-Bukhari and Muslim have recorded in their Sahih collections that on the eve before the third day of battle, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) announced, "Tomorrow, I shall give the standard (flag) of Islam to a man who loves Allah and His Messenger, and Allah and His Messenger love him." He also added that it would be to the man "...who is brave, who would not show his back to the enemy, and would not return without success.

" Every soldier in the Muslim army went to sleep that night pondering who that man would be, and praying that the honor would be bestowed on him. The next morning, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) called for Imam Ali, gave him the standard of Islam, and sent the army out under his command. Ali fought and killed the mighty and dreaded warrior Mehrab, as well as several other highly reputed enemy warriors. He also broke open the door of the fortress single-handedly and flung it across the moat so that the Muslim army could enter and secure the

fortress.

When Ali victoriously returned, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) embraced him and showered him with praises, including these words: "...Ali, you will be nearest to me on the Day of Judgment; you will be next to me at the Fountain of Kauthar; your blood is my blood, your flesh is my flesh, your friendship is my friendship, and your enmity is my enmity; a war against you is a war against me!"

The Marriage of Imam Ali.

Imam Ali's marriage with Hazrat Fatima, the daughter of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.), took place in the 2nd year after Hijra. Whereas the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) had refused many proposals for her from prominent and wealthy companions, he was delighted when Ali approached him asking for his daughter's hand, and said that it was a welcome and happy proposal. The Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) also later informed the Muslims that since he had no male heir, Allah (SWT) decreed that his progeny would issue forth from the union of his daughter Fatima with Ali.

On the occasion of their marriage, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) prayed to Allah (SWT) with these words: "O Allah! Bless both of them, sanctify their progeny, and grant them the keys of Thy beneficence, the treasures of Thy wisdom and Thy genius, and let both of them be a source of peace and blessing to my people."

Addressing Imam Ali, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) said, "Fortunate are you indeed! Of all the virtuous women of the world, your wife is the queen!" Then turning towards Fatima, he said, "Of all the virtuous men of the world, your husband is the king." To both of them he said, "May Allah keep you pious and chaste and bless your children. Verily, I am a friend to him who befriends you, and an enemy to him who is your enemy."

Ali as Caliph and ruler:

After the death of the third Caliph, Ali (A.S.) was literally forced to accept the position of the Caliph. He did so reluctantly on the condition that he would rule strictly by the true Sunnah of the Prophet (S.A.W.) and by the ordinances contained in the Qur'an. He immediately removed the corrupt regional governors of the Islamic empire, and demanded honesty, integrity, accountability, and compassion from the government officials. He himself adopted an extremely austere lifestyle.

When he appointed Malik-ul-Ashtar as governor of Egypt, he issued orders to him as to how he should deal with various personalities, the poor subjects, and how to handle various situations. He emphasized on fearing God, and honesty, justice, and humility.

The famous Arab Christian scholar, jurist, and philosopher Abdul Maseeh Anthaki says that

this order of Imam Ali established a far superior code of administration than the one handed down by Prophet Moses. He congratulated Ali for establishing those principles.

Please refer to Nahjul Balagha, Letter No. 53 (An Order to Malik-ul-Ashtar).

His letter to Osman Ibne Haneef, the Governer of Basra, gives us an indication of Imam Ali's philosophy and his administration. Here are a few excerpts from that famous letter:

"Ibne Haneef! I have received information that a person of Basra invited you to a dinner and you immediately accepted the invitation. And very sumptuous meals were served there. I am sorry to hear the news. I never expected that you would accept invitation from a person who invites big officers and rich people and from whose door the poor and hungry are turned away rudely. Look carefully into the things you eat.

If there is even a shade of their being obtained unlawfully, then throw them away. Only eat such things about which you are perfectly certain that they are obtained in honest, lawful, and virtuous ways."

"Now look at your Imam and leader. In this world he has satisfied himself and is content with two old, coarse, and worn out garments to wear, and two pieces of bread a day. It is not possible for me to satiate myself when there are people around me whom hunger and thirst keep restless and writhing."

"O' Ibne Haneef! Fear Allah and be content with the bread that you get with lawful means, so that you may be exempted and freed from the fire of hell."

.Please refer to Nahjul Balagha, Letter No. 45

His martyrdom:

During his brief rule of about 6 years, Hazrath Ali had to deal with corruption, rebellion by his Governors and officials, and treachery by his own followers

He fought several wars to defend his principles and to maintain the integrity of the Muslim Empire. He died a martyr at the age of 63 on the 21st of the month of Ramadan, 40 A.H., after being mortally wounded by a Kharijite while he was praying in the mosque at Kufa. His words when he was struck with the sword were: "I thank thee O' Lord for rewarding me with martyrdom. How kind and Gracious of Thee. May Thy Mercies further me to the Glory of Thy realm".

His knowledge:

Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) said this about Imam Ali (A.S.): "I am the City of Knowledge, and Ali is the gate." He also said: "Verily the Holy Qur'an is revealed on seven letters (levels) of which there is no letter which has not a manifest (exoteric)and a latent (esoteric) meaning, and

verily Ali Ibne Abi Talib, with him is the (knowledge of) manifest and the latent (of it.)" Sahih al-Bukhari & Suyuti's Itqaan. The above two Hadiths speak volumes about Ali's knowledge. His vast field of knowledge included biology, medicine, astronomy, the origin of universe (please refer to his famous sermon number one in Nahjul Balagha), philosophy, Islamic jurisprudence, mathematics, rhetoric, and more. He made major contributions to developing the grammar of the Arabic language.

Nahjul Balagha:

The title of this book means "Peak of Eloquence." It was compiled by Syed Razi and contains sermons, letters and sayings of Imam Ali. It is said that its subject matter is next only to the Qur'an in eloquence, guidance, and knowledge. It is a book that is not only beneficial to Muslims but to all mankind. His code of administration as documented in Nahjul Balagha was quoted in the United Nations by the U.N. Secretary General in the year 2002 during a meeting of the Arab Development Fund. He advised the rulers and government officials to follow the principles contained therein as a role model of governance.