

Imam Hasan al-Askari (as): Faith, Vision and Firm Will

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The fourth month of the Islamic calendar coincides with one of the reported dates of birth of the eleventh Shi'i Imam, Imam Hasan al-Askari (a). Ambiguities concerning the life of the Imam extend not only to relatively meagre issues like historical dates, but unfortunately, much of his life - just as with his noble father, Imam Ali al-Hadi (as) and Grandfather, Imam Muhammad al-Jawad (as) -has been lost to history, and veiled from his lovers and the Ummah at large. This sad reality is owed primarily to the heavy repression of the ruling Abbasid caliphate. Indeed, one of the most common epithets used for the eleventh Imam, al-Askari (as), points toward this fact.

Driven largely by the motivation of isolating the Imam from the popular base of his following, and by the attempt to relegate the supreme inheritors of Prophetic knowledge to obscurity, the Abbasid caliph of the time, alMutawwakil, forcefully summoned Imam al-Askari (as) ' s father from Medina to a military garrison in Iraq. Later transformed into a city that came to be known as Samarra, the location was initially a military outpost that housed the Abbasid caliph, his advisors, generals and army personnel.

Naturally, within this context, the movements of the Imam were heavily restricted and constant surveillance was applied to this end. This status quo persisted throughout the life of Imam al-Hadi (as) and continued right up until the martyrdom of his son. Nevertheless, as with all Satanic plots devised to silence the Divine prophets and righteous throughout history, the Abbasids' scheme to somehow eradicate the Imams from the psyche of Muslims failed miserably. Numerous reports have come down to us highlighting the lofty qualities of Imam al-Askari (as), as well as his keen and certainly crucial role in guiding and attending to the most pressing issues that affected Muslims. One of the central themes observed in the correspondences of the Imam to his followers is his repeated emphasis on fostering unity. The era of the Imam was marked by growing confusion and discord amongst the Shia, at various levels, which was owed to the plots of the Abbasid caliphate. In response, the Imam masterfully dealt away with these confusions and divisions, and defended the faith from the disorienting waves of scepticism, most visibly illustrated in the story of Ishaq al-Kindi.^[1]

This rich legacy, no matter how constricted by historical circumstance, calls on us to pay a closer look and urges us to draw inspiration from its treasures. As Muslims living through a sensitive era today, the personality and example of the Imam holds even greater significance Try to picture: a lonely man pulled away from his hometown, family and companions, and

hurled right into the midst of a military outpost as an enemy, where every move is watched and the most basic supplies cut off. If that were not enough, one is also regularly plunged into the dark dungeons of the oppressor whose horrors one can only imagine. Now ask yourself, what choices would one make when confronted by this reality? The life of the Imam presents a perfect model to be emulated even when confronted by the harshest and cruellest of contexts. It is a practical call for his followers to act with integrity and to be individuals of firm will and determination.

Selecting defeatist notions, losing faith in Divine grace, and creating rifts and discord are all antithetical to the teachings of the Imam. Words of advice and admonitions delivered by the Ahlul Bayt (as) contain, no doubt, the guiding lanterns for our salvation in both worlds, as well as the firmest security from falling into the traps of doubt and misguidance. Here then is one of the letters of Imam Hasan al-Askari (as) addressed to his followers: "I recommend you to fear Allah, be pious in your religion, strive for Allah, be truthful in speaking, give deposits back to its owners [regardless of whether] he is good or bad, increase prostration, and be good to neighbours. By these (principles) Muhammad (s) came with his mission. Associate with your kin, attend their funerals, visit their sick, and carry out their rights; for if anyone of you is pious in his religion, truthful in his speech, he gives deposits back to its owners, and treats people kindly, it shall be said about him: 'this is a Shia', and this shall please me."

Fear Allah, be good and do not be bad! Attract every love to us, and keep any obscenity away from us, because whatever good is said about us we deserve it, and whatever bad is said about us is not in us. We have a right in the Book of Allah, kinship to the messenger of Allah, and purification from Allah that no one other than us claims but a liar. Mention Allah constantly and remember death! Recite the Qur'an and send peace and blessings on the Prophet (s), because the sending of blessings on the Prophet (s) has ten good deeds. Keep in mind what I have [recommended you! I pray Allah to protect you (I farewell you), and send peace unto you." [2

References:

1. The Life of Imam Al-Hasan Al-Askari, Study and Analysis by Baqir Shareef Al-Qurashi
- .2. Ibid