

The Quran and its Message

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Joseph A Islam www.quransmessage.com

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

IMAMATE - A SHI'A DOCTRINE

Joseph A Islam

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There are often many claims that are made with regards the concept of 'Imams' or 'Imamate' and what it may possibly entail. The understanding by Muslims that align themselves with the Shi'a school of thought is quite specific. This article will attempt to explore how the term 'imam' is actually used in the Quran.

The doctrine of Imamate from a Shi'a perspective will first be noted as it is a fundamental core belief of the Shi'a which separates them from other mainstream Muslims.

It is to be noted that for the 'Shi'a', Imamate is a matter of fundamental belief, without which one does not remain a Shi'a.

MAINSTREAM SHI'A DOCTRINE

Mainstream Shi'a Imamate (12er Shi'a) hinges on the understanding that apart from the Prophets and Messengers of God, there exist 12 divinely appointed men called 'Imams' who originate from the direct lineage of the Prophet's daughter Fatima and cousin / son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib (Ali).

Ali is considered the first Imam and his direct lineage are considered to be the rightful successors of Prophet Muhammad's ^(pbuh) legacy of true divinely appointed guidance. These 12 leaders are both **infallible** and **possess** access to 'special esoteric' knowledge not available to ordinary human beings. There is also an understanding that the world cannot be devoid of their guidance otherwise it would perish. The last and final 12th imam, al-Mahdi did not die but moved into a state of occultation (hidden by God) and still remains in that state for over a 1000 years till the present day.

This concept of Imamate and its premise **are not to be found anywhere in the Quran**. The Quran discusses all core beliefs required by 'believers', repetitively throughout the scripture and

succinctly captures it in verse 2:285. However, nowhere does such a doctrine of Imamat as understood by the Shi'a appear anywhere in the Quran. It is simply a doctrine that is not taught by the scripture and only appears in [Islamic secondary sources](#), in particular, Shi'a specific sources. **Please see related article [1] below.**

All Muslims however (including Shi'a) are agreed that the only scripture given to the Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh) was the Quran.

QURAN'S DEFINITION OF A BELIEVER (ARABIC: MUMIN)

002:285

The messenger believes in what has been revealed to him from his Lord, and (so do) the believers; they all believe in God and His angels and His books and His messengers; We make no difference between any of His messengers; and they say: We hear and obey, our Lord! Thy forgiveness (do we crave), and to You (God) is the eventual course.

HOW DOES THE QURAN MAKE USE OF THE TERM IMAM?

- The term 'Imam' has been used in the Quran in various ways such as to signify leaders, to lead, to guide and as guidance (as has been referred to in the case of scriptures).
- Leaders can **also misguide** people and lead them astray. This too can be confirmed from the Quran.
- The concept of 'Imamate' as the infallible righteous bloodline of the prophet **does not exist even once** in the Quran and if anything, the premise of such a doctrine is actually negated. **Please see related article [2] below.**
- Infallibility remains an attribute of God only and was never an attribute of any human being.

إِمَامٌ A person, (Ṣ, Mgh,) or learned man, (Mṣb,) whose example is followed, or who is imitated; (Ṣ, Mgh, Mṣb;) any exemplar, or object of imitation, (T, M, K,) to a people, or company of men, (T,) such as a head, chief, or leader, or some other person, (M, K,) whether they be following the right way or be erring therefrom: (T:) applied alike to a male and to a female: (Mgh, Mṣb:) applied to a female, it occurs in a phrase in which it is written by some with ḍ: (Mgh:) but this is said to be a mistake: (Mṣb:) it is correctly without ḍ, because it is a subst., not an epithet: (Mgh, Mṣb:) or it is allowable with ḍ, because it implies the meaning of an epithet: (Mṣb:) and إِمَامَةٌ signifies the same: (T, M, K:) the pl. of the former is إِمَامَةٌ,

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [1]

RIGHTEOUS LEADERSHIP

Isaac & Jacob (Leaders / Guides) for the people:

021.072-73

“And We bestowed on him Isaac and, as an additional gift, (a grandson), Jacob, and We made righteous men of every one (of them). And We made them **leaders (Arabic: Immatun)**, guiding (men) by Our Command, and We sent them inspiration to do good deeds, to establish regular prayers, and to practice regular charity; and they constantly served Us (and Us only)”

Leaders amongst the Children of Israel:

032.023-24

“We did indeed give the Book to Moses: be not then in doubt of its reaching (thee): and We made it a guide to the Children of Israel. And We appointed, from among them, **leaders (Arabic: Immatun)**, giving guidance under Our command, so long as they persevered with patience and continued to have faith in Our Signs”.

UNRIGHTEOUS LEADERSHIP

Pharaoh’s men were leaders (Imams) that have led their people to the fire

028.041

“And we made them (but) **leaders (Arabic: Imamatus)** inviting to the Fire; and on the Day of Judgment no help shall they find”

Imams (Leaders / Guides) from Prophet Abraham’s (pbuh) progeny will NOT all be righteous

002.124

“And (remember) when his Lord tried Abraham with (His) commands, and he fulfilled them, He said: Indeed! I have appointed thee a leader **(Arabic: Imaman)** for mankind. (Abraham) said: And of my offspring (will there be leaders)? He said: **My covenant does not include wrong-doers.”**

- It is confirmed from the above verse that not all of Prophet Abraham’s (pbuh) progeny would remain righteous. This would be the case whether they were leaders or otherwise. Once again, this underscores the theme discussed in the related article [1] below.

People will be summoned with their Leaders (Righteous and Unrighteous)

017.071-72

“One day We shall call together all human beings with their **(respective) Imams (Arabic: bi-imamihim)**: those who are given their record in their right hand will read it (with pleasure), and they will not be dealt with unjustly in the least. **But those who were blind in this world, will be blind in the hereafter and most astray from the Path.”**

OTHER REFERENCES TO IMAM (TO LEAD / GUIDE)

Believers can also be leaders as guides to lead the righteous

025.074-75

“And those who pray, “Our Lord! Grant unto us spouses and offspring who will be the comfort of our eyes, and give us (the grace) **to lead (Arabic: Imaman)** the righteous.” Those are the ones who will be rewarded with the highest place in heaven, because of their patient constancy: therein shall they be met with salutations and peace”

The scripture of Prophet Moses (pbuh), referred to as sent to ‘Lead’ (Arabic: Imaman) or guide.

011.017

“Can they be (like) those who accept a Clear (Sign) from their Lord and whom a witness from Himself does teach, as did the Book of Moses before it, **a guide (Arabic: Imaman)** and a mercy? They believe

in it; but those of the sects that reject it - the fire will be their promised meeting place. Be not then in doubt about it: for it is the truth from thy Lord: yet many among men do not believe!”

كِتَابِ مُوسَىٰ إِمَامًا وَرَحْمَةً أُولَٰئِكَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ

imaman

Illustration - Joseph Islam

This is repeated in another Surah

046.012

“And before this, was the Book of Moses as a **guide / lead (Arabic: Imaman)** and a mercy: And this Book confirms (it) in the Arabic tongue; to admonish the unjust, and as Glad Tidings to those who do right.”

وَمِنْ قَبْلِهِ كِتَابِ مُوسَىٰ إِمَامًا وَرَحْمَةً

imaman

Illustration - Joseph Islam

FINAL THOUGHTS

The various aspects of the term 'Imam' have been seen in different Quranic contexts, none of which support the fundamental doctrine of the Shi'a.

Related Articles:

- (1) [Shi'a Doctrine and Literary Sources - A Brief Survey](#)
- (2) [Appeal to Righteousness Based on Lineage, Relationship, Companionship and Proximity](#)

REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 1, Page 91

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[Joseph Islam](#)

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