

Ali ibn al-Husayn Zayn al'Abidin (658-713 C.E.)

The great-grandson of the Prophet, 'Ali was present in Kerbala with his father, Husayn b. 'Ali. He was spared from the massacre as he was too ill to fight. As his mother was the daughter of a Persian king and his father the grandson of the Prophet, 'Ali was known as "the son of two noble parents."

In Sunni circles, 'Ali is highly respected due to his piety, asceticism, and generosity. He is also regarded as a reliable transmitter of traditions and an authority in legal matters. Due to his excessive prayers and devotion, 'Ali was bestowed the honorific titled "Zayn al-'Abidin" (ornament of the worshippers) by al-Zuhri, a famous traditionist.

The Shi'is regard Zayn al-'Abidin as the fourth divinely appointed imam. In Shi'i circles, he is also known for his excessive prayers, ascetic practices, and piety. He is reportedly the author of many beautiful and moving spiritual discourses that have been preserved in books like "The Psalms of Islam." The famous poet al-Farazdaq composed numerous verses that extolled 'Ali's eminent status, noble lineage, and position as the leader of the Shi'is of his time.

After the events of Kerbala, 'Ali led a quiet life in Medina refusing to back Mukhtar's (d. 687) uprising against those who had killed his father in Kerbala. 'Ali remained neutral in other politico-religious movements in Medina, especially in Ibn Zubayr's (d. 692) revolt against Yazid. Due to his neutral stance, many Shi'is decided to join the movement associated with his uncle, Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya. Muhammad's followers, called the Kaysaniyya, believed that he was the Mahdi or Messiah.

Shi'i hagiographic literature contains numerous anecdotes of his miracles. When his uncle Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya challenged him to the leadership of the community, the dispute was allegedly resolved by the black stone at the Ka'aba which testified that 'Ali was the legitimate imam of the time.

Towards the end of his life, 'Ali was able to gather a small group of disciples like Aban b. Taghlib, Jabir b. 'Abd Allah al-Ansari and Abu Hamza Thabit b. Dinar who saw 'Ali as the legitimate imam of the time. After his death, a struggle for leadership emerged between two of his sons, Muhammad (also called al-Baqir) and Zayd.

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