

## **8- IMAM REZA (AS): THE IMAM OF CONTENTMENT**

This chapter reviews the life of Imam Reza (AS) and provides an overview of his social, scientific, and political achievements. This chapter also highlights the conspiracy and political complexity that led to his selection as the crown prince by the Abbasid Caliph.

## **8-1-Before the Government of Haroon**

### **8-1-1-Birth**

Imam Ali ibn Musa (AS), also known as Reza, was born on the 11th of Zu al-Qa'dah in the year 148 of Hijri in Medina. He was also known as 'Abul-Hasan'. As per family traditions of the Ahlul-Bayt, Shia Imams with the name of Ali were also honored with Imam Ali's title of 'Abul-Hasan'. The Imam was born less than a month after the martyrdom of his grandfather, Imam Sadiq (AS), who had been eager to meet him. Imam Sadiq had frequently told his son, Imam Kazim (AS), "The scholar of the Prophet's family will be from your lineage and I wish to meet him." Some historical records suggest that Imam Reza was the oldest son of Imam Kazim. Imam Reza's mother was a slave who was originally from Africa, from an area that is currently between Egypt and Sudan. She was owned by Imam Kazim's mother, Hamideh, who noticed her piety and great character. Hamideh then decided to marry her to Imam Kazim. She was called by various names, including Najmeh Khatoon. To purge bad memories from the period of her captivity, she was named Tuktam by Imam Kazim after their marriage. Also, when she gave birth to Imam Reza, Imam Kazim called her by the title of 'Tahereh', which means 'the pure one'.

## **8-2-During the Government of Haroon**

### **8-2-1-Haroon's Government**

When Haroon assumed power<sup>95</sup>, the Abbasid government was at its peak, and had expanded from Northern Africa to India. Haroon portrayed himself as a religious individual, but he was heartless and cruel in his government. He kept himself busy with amusement, musical parties, and gave huge amounts of wealth from the public Bayt al-Mal to famous singers for his amusement.

### **8-2-2-Before Imam**

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<sup>95</sup> Rabi' al-Awwal, 170 (Imam's age: 21)

Imam Reza's birth coincides with the martyrdom of Imam Sadiq and the beginning of the Imamate of his father, Imam Kazim. Imam Reza grew up under the direct guidance of his father. He witnessed his father's extensive oppression by multiple Abbasid caliphs during his father's long Imamate of around 34 years. There are limited historical records on the life of Imam Reza before his Imamate. The available records show the Imam's divine knowledge and his special status in the eyes of Imam Kazim.

Divine knowledge, which was an essential characteristic of the Shia Imams, was apparent in Imam Reza years before his Imamate. The Imam would sit in the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina and would answer the people's questions regarding the Islamic laws when he was in his early 20s.

Imam Reza grew up in a large family and had many siblings, including 17 brothers. However, Imam Kazim paid special attention to Imam Reza over his other children. He introduced Imam Reza to his sons as 'the scholar of the Prophet's family', and asked them to refer to him for their religious questions and to seek guidance. Despite the extensive pressure enforced on Imam Kazim during his lifetime, he introduced Imam Reza as his successor to the Imamate on various occasions. Once, Imam Kazim came to a family gathering in the Mosque of the Prophet with his son, Imam Reza. He introduced Imam Reza as his deputy during his lifetime, and his successor after his death. He asked everyone to testify to his statement. On another occasion, Imam Kazim gathered a group of his family members and companions as witnesses for his will. In his will, Imam Kazim chose Imam Reza as his successor and gave him full authority to decide various aspects of his family affairs after himself. These affairs included decisions about the marriages of Imam Kazim's daughters, the spending of one third of his wealth, and stipends to be paid to his wives. Imam Kazim and the witnesses then sealed the will.

### **8-2-3-Martyrdom of Imam Kazim<sup>96</sup>**

During the time of Haroon, there was an excessive amount of pressure and oppression on Imam Kazim by the government. Haroon ordered the imprisonment of Imam Kazim at various locations in Basrah and Baghdad for around four years. He eventually ordered the poisoning and martyrdom of Imam Kazim. Historical records suggest Imam Reza's miraculous travel from Medina to Baghdad on the night of the martyrdom of Imam Kazim to take care of his father's funeral rites. The Imam then returned to Medina on the same night, in hiding. On the following day, Imam Reza informed his family about his father's martyrdom, but asked them to keep it confidential until the news of the martyrdom was officially delivered to Medina. After a few days, when the news was brought to Medina by a messenger, the family of Imam Kazim publicly grieved for their loss.

### **8-2-4-Beginning of Imamat**

At the beginning of Imam Reza's Imamat, he did not publicly declare his Imamat due to the extensive amount of pressure dominating the society following Imam Kazim's imprisonment and martyrdom by Haroon. It was highly possible that Haroon would have been a threat for Imam Reza, so the Imam only revealed his Imamat to his family, as well as to his father's loyal companions and representatives.

Imam Reza was a source of Islamic ethics and morals in the society. He would respond to bad behavior with good behavior. At the beginning of his Imamat, one of his brothers, Abbas, accused him of inheriting large hidden wealth from their father, Imam Kazim. He brought the Imam to the court and asked the judge to order the Imam to open the sealed will that had been passed to him from Imam Kazim. The Imam and two of the witnesses of Imam Kazim's will rejected Abbas's accusation, but Abbas opened the sealed will in the court and read it. He realized that there was no indication of wealth left by Imam Kazim in his will. Instead, Imam Kazim had explicitly chosen Imam Reza as

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<sup>96</sup> 25 Rajab, 183 AH (Imam's age: 34)

his successor and had asked his other sons to fully obey him. Upon revealing the will, Imam Reza did not retaliate against his brother. Instead, Imam Reza explained to his brother that the motive behind his brother's accusation had been his debt and the fact that he needed money. He told Abbas that he would pay off all of his debt and would not hesitate to help him in the future and prayed for him.

### **8-2-5-Confrontation with the Vaghefis**

The main challenge Imam Reza faced in the beginning of his Imamate was from a few of his father's representatives who refused to accept him as the Imam after Imam Kazim. They were among the representatives of Imam Kazim in his network of representatives across the Islamic territory. They were responsible for guiding the Shias according to the Imam's teachings and advice, collecting their obligatory Islamic dues, and resolving issues among the Shias in their community. These individuals were among the Shia scholars spreading the narrations of the Shia Imams, and were qualified in their Islamic knowledge. For around four years, during the imprisonment of Imam Kazim, they did not transfer the collected obligatory Islamic dues from their communities to Imam Kazim, nor did they spend it according to his guidance. The stored wealth in their possession grew to a significant amount and was enough to entice them against their duties. When Imam Reza asked them to transfer the collected wealth to him as the next Imam, they refused. They instead denied the Imamate of Imam Reza by denying the martyrdom of Imam Kazim. They claimed that Imam Kazim was not martyred, but instead was the Mahdi promised by the Prophet and had simply disappeared from sight. These representatives were able to gather some support from their Shia communities and separated themselves from the majority of the Shias who accepted Imam Reza as the next Imam. This faction of Shia was known as the Vaghefi, or those who stopped at the Imamate of Imam Kazim.

The denial of Imam Kazim's martyrdom by the Vaghefis was against clear historical evidence, as many had witnessed the martyrdom of

Imam Kazim and had attended his burial. For example, right after Imam Kazim's martyrdom, Sendi ibn Shahak, who poisoned the Imam, tried to portray the Imam's martyrdom as a natural death. He gathered more than 50 people in his house and exhibited the Imam's body. He asked them to testify that the Imam's body did not have any sign of injury or suffocation. He later put the Imam's corpse on the bridge of Baghdad over the Tigris River to disrespect the Imam and the Shia belief. The people of Baghdad visited the Imam's corpse to witness his demise. Later, when Haroon's uncle, Sulayman ibn Abi-Ja'far, was informed of Sendi ibn Shahak's actions, he found it against the political favors of the Abbasid government. He feared this could trigger Shias, who were in large numbers, in Baghdad and the other cities to rise up against the government. Thus, he sent his agents to retrieve the Imam's corpse from Sendi ibn Shahak's soldiers. He then held a grand burial ceremony for the Imam, where crowds of Muslims participated. Despite the clear evidence surrounding the martyrdom of Imam Kazim, the Vaghefis insisted on their belief and continued in their ignorance.

The Vaghefi faction began with three of Imam Kazim's representatives who had monetary interests. They were able to gather some supporters from the Shias, as they had social acceptance in their communities and were known as scholars who recited narrations from the Shia Imams. They fabricated narrations from Imam Sadiq and the other Shia Imams in their own favor to prove their false claim that Imam Kazim was the promised Mahdi and was still alive. They also misinterpreted some narrations from the Shia Imams to their own benefit. Among their fallacies was to use Imam Kazim's name, Musa, and relating it to the story of Prophet Moses who had isolated himself and disappeared from his nation for around 40 days. They concluded that Imam Kazim had disappeared temporarily and would later appear before the people.

While Imam Reza had not yet publicly declared his Imamate, he did not stay silent in confrontation with the Vaghefis who had branched from the Shia community. Imam Reza debated with the leaders and the followers of the Vaghefis on multiple occasions to guide them. The

Imam proved to them that his father was no longer alive and that his inheritance had been distributed amongst his children. The Imam also corrected fabricated narrations by the Vaghefis and interpreted the true meaning of the vague narrations they misused. The Imam also provided them with the knowledge of the unseen to prove his divine knowledge, a sign of the Shia Imams. Consequently, the Imam was able to guide many of the Vaghefis to his Imamatus.

The remaining Vaghefis caused trouble for Imam Reza during his Imamatus. They instilled doubts in the hearts of his Shia followers. They looked for any excuse to blame the Imam and to justify their own beliefs. They asked the Imam, if he was the righteous Imam, why had he not declared his Imamatus publicly? The Imam responded that he was following the Prophet, who had started his mission of prophethood in hiding. They also challenged the Imamatus of Imam Reza, since he did not have any sons to inherit his Imamatus in the future. Imam Reza countered their challenge by telling them that God would bless him with a son who would be the next Imam after him. Imam Reza's son, Imam Javad, was born when he was 46 years old<sup>97</sup>. After all of the accusations, the Vaghefis insisted in their belief. The Imam cursed the leaders of the Vaghefis and introduced them as being in the same rank as infidels due to their lies that they associated with the Shia Imams. The Imam told his followers to cut any relationship with the Vaghefis and to isolate them in the community. Historically, the Vaghefi ideology did not last long and has become extinct.

### **8-2-6-Haroon and the Imam**

Haroon did not regard the Imam as an immediate threat for his government. However, he was frequently advised by those close to him, particularly his minister, Yahya ibn Khalid Barmaki, to take action against Imam Reza who was being followed by the Shias as the Imam after Imam Kazim but Haroon rejected their wishes to act against the Imam. Haroon would respond, "We have killed his father. Should I kill

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<sup>97</sup> 15 Ramazan, 195 AH (Imam's age: 46)

them all (to satisfy you)?” Haroon was aware that Muslims, especially the Shias, held him responsible for the martyrdom of Imam Kazim. He did not want to put his government in further trouble by aggravating the long-standing hostilities between the Prophet’s descendants and the Abbasids.

Haroon had appointed spies in Medina to closely monitor all aspects of Imam Reza’s activities. Once, Haroon received a report from one of his spies that the Imam had gone to the market and purchased some domestic animals. Later, someone came to Haroon and claimed the Imam had opened his house to the people and had been calling them to his Imamat. Haroon surprisingly responded that the spy earlier had given a contrary report to what he just reported, and thus Haroon did not pay attention to this obvious conspiracy against the Imam.

Due to the frequent ill-talks against the Imam, Haroon once decided to kill him. He sent someone to bring the Imam into his presence. When the Imam saw Haroon, he quietly recited a supplication which had been passed down to him from the Prophet. When Haroon looked at the Imam, his decision suddenly changed. He told the Imam that he had ordered a large reward to be paid to him, and told the Imam to write down his family’s needs. When the Imam returned, Haroon consoled himself by saying that he had wanted something and God had wanted something else, and whatever God wants is better.

### **8-2-7-Declaration of Imamat**

After a period estimated by some to be around four years, Imam Reza publicly announced his Imamat to the people. He was frequently warned by his close companions that the declaration of his Imamat might trigger Haroon to persecute him. The Imam dismissed their warnings and promised them that Haroon could not harm him, similar to how the Prophet had made a prophecy that Abu-Jahl, one of his prominent opponents in Mecca, would not be able to harm him. The Imam assured them that they could consider this prophecy a sign of his Imamat.



The Imam's declaration of his Imamatus coincided with the time that Haroon decided to remove the powerful Barmaki family from his government. Haroon was afraid that the increasing power of the Barmaki family in his government could endanger his power. As a result, he killed<sup>98</sup> or imprisoned influential characters and politicians from the Barmaki family. He also imprisoned his famous minister, Yahya ibn Khaild Barmaki, whose hostility led to Imam Kazim's martyrdom. Yahya was kept in prison for a few years until his death. The elimination of the Barmakis from power benefitted the Imam, as they were hostile towards the Ahlul-Bayt and would frequently speak ill of Imam Kazim and Imam Reza to Haroon.

Shortly after, Haroon's attention was diverted to the riots and unrest in the eastern parts of his government. Hamza's rebellion in Sistan and Raafi' ibn Layth's rebellion in central Asia were able to gather support from the people, as they had been subject to the oppression and the injustice of Ali ibn Isa, Haroon's governor in Khorasan. Haroon wanted to create a smooth transition of power for his sons and was concerned about the uprisings and the instabilities in those regions. Thus, he personally travelled to Khorasan to manage the situation<sup>99</sup>. After meeting with Ali ibn Isa in Rey, Iran, he decided to return to Baghdad, as he had received the news of instability at the border with the Roman Empire. The insecurity in Khorasan remained unsolved until Haroon removed Ali ibn Isa from the power and sent troops towards central Asia for a war against Raafi' ibn Layth. He travelled to Khorasan again to oversee the situation despite his illness. However, he could not complete his journey, and died close to the city of Tus in Khorasan, current day Mashhad, Iran<sup>100</sup>.

Haroon's engagement in various problems in his government benefitted Imam Reza, as Haroon did not find an opportunity to persecute the Imam. Thus, the Imam continued his Imamatus in Medina

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<sup>98</sup> Muharram, 187 AH (Imam's age: 38)

<sup>99</sup> 189 AH (Imam's age: 40)

<sup>100</sup> 11 Jumada al-Thani, 193 AH (Imam's age: 44)

without any major threats from Haroon's government, and his prophecy that Haroon would be unable to harm him became a reality.

### **8-2-8-Haroon's Plan for the Future of the Abbasids**

Haroon, who was concerned about the power struggle between his sons after his death, decided to implement an innovative plan that was unique in the history of the Abbasids. He divided the entire Islamic territory under his control amongst three of his sons and provided them with independent resources and income. He gave the mainland of his territory to Amin, his primary successor. It included Iraq, Hijaz, Syria, and Northern Africa, with the capital in Baghdad. This large portion of his kingdom was stable and dominated by the Arabs, who were supportive of an Arab caliph. He chose Ma'mun as Amin's successor in the caliphate, and gave him rulership over the eastern parts of his territory, including Iran and Khorasan, with the capital in Merv, current day Mary, Turkmenistan. These areas were unstable and subject to various uprisings. Haroon knew that Ma'mun, with his leadership skills, could manage the instability in these areas. Furthermore, Ma'mun's mother was an Iranian slave, and he could better collect support from the Iranians in that area. Finally, Haroon selected his son, Qasim, as Ma'mun's successor in the caliphate and gave him rulership over small territories around Turkey and northern Iraq. This area was also unstable, however, due to its small size, Haroon was hopeful that Qasim would be able to manage it. Haroon also authorized Ma'mun to remove Qasim from his position in the future. To ensure that his plan would be implemented after his death, Haroon performed Hajj<sup>101</sup> with his sons and asked them to write a testimony to promise that they would abide by the deal. Haroon then ordered the testimony to be hung inside the Ka'ba as evidence for the other Muslims who were not present in the Hajj that year.

### **8-3-During the Government of Amin**

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<sup>101</sup> 186 AH (Imam's age: 38)

### **8-3-1-Amin in Power**

After Haroon, his son, Amin, became the caliph as his primary successor. Amin was a corrupt pleasure-seeker and lacked common leadership skills. His government was mainly managed by his minister, Fazl ibn Rabi'. Haroon initially wanted to select Ma'mun as his primary successor instead of Amin, since he was more clever and had stronger leadership skills than Amin. However, he changed his mind to respect his beloved wife, Zubaidah, who was Amin's mother and belonged to the Abbasid royal family. Ma'mun's mother, however, was an Iranian slave. Thus, Amin had more support among the Abbasid family and the Arabs for the caliphate compared to Ma'mun.

### **8-3-2-Amin and Ma'mun in War**

Right after Haroon's death in Khorasan, Amin called his troops and treasury to Baghdad. He initiated a series of actions against Ma'mun, which damaged the relationship between the two brothers. He then asked Ma'mun to resign from his position, which Ma'mun clearly rejected. Amin ousted Ma'mun and Qasim from their positions. Instead, he appointed his infant son, Musa, as his successor. He also destroyed the testimony about Haroon's order for succession hung inside the Ka'ba.

This chain of events led to extreme animosity between the two brothers. Ma'mun was at a disadvantage against Amin, so he needed more support from the people under his rulership. Ma'mun began treating his people kindly. He reduced their taxes, rewarded the elderly, increased the salary of his troops, and portrayed himself to be an open-minded and caring ruler. He emphasized his mother's Iranian heritage to gather more support from the Iranians. He selected his minister, Fazl ibn Sahl, and the head of his army, Taahir ibn Hossein, from the Iranians to show his commitment to them. He also built a good relationship with his neighboring governments and settled the uprising of Raafi' ibn Layth by accepting his surrender.

Amin was certain of his victory and deployed a large army towards

Khorasan to forcefully eliminate Ma'mun from power. He selected Ali ibn Isa, the former governor of Khorasan for around ten years during Haroon's government, as his army's leader. The people in Khorasan hated Ali ibn Isa due to his oppression and injustice during his past government. This mistake by Amin was effectively used by Ma'mun to warn the people in Khorasan about the consequences of Ali ibn Isa's victory, and thus more people joined Ma'mun's army. Ali ibn Isa's army confronted Ma'mun's army near Rey in Iran in a battle under the leadership of Taahir ibn Hossein<sup>102</sup>. Although Ali ibn Isa's army extensively outnumbered the army of Taahir ibn Hossein, they were unexpectedly defeated, and Ali ibn Isa was killed in the battle.

After this battle, Amin repeatedly recruited more men for his army and sent them to battle against Ma'mun's army. Over more than two years, multiple battles took place between the two brothers. These battles ended with victories for Ma'mun, and his army moved closer to Baghdad, the capital of Amin's leadership. Ma'mun's army surrounded Baghdad for more than a year before they finally seized the city and killed Amin<sup>103</sup>.

After Amin's death, Ma'mun officially became the only Abbasid Caliph. Instead of relocating to the capital, Baghdad, Ma'mun decided to stay in Merv and made it the capital of his government. With this decision, Ma'mun wanted to show appreciation to his companions and the people of Khorasan who had supported him to gain power. Also, Baghdad was the center of the Abbasid royal family who had betrayed Ma'mun and supported Amin in the battles against him. They were hostile toward Ma'mun, so Ma'mun preferred to distance himself from them.

### **8-3-3-Amin and the Imam**

There are no historical records about any communication between Amin and Imam Reza during the five years of Amin's government.

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<sup>102</sup> 195 AH (Imam's age: 46)

<sup>103</sup> Rabi' al-Awwal, 198 AH (Imam's age: 49)

Amin was a corrupt pleasure-seeker who indulged in intoxication and other sinful behaviors. His confrontation and frequent wars against Ma'mun prohibited him from taking any action against the Imam.

### **8-3-4-The Imam: Source of Divine Knowledge**

Imam Reza was known for his knowledge amongst the Islamic scholars. He was given the title of 'Alim-e-Ale-Muhammad' or 'the scholar of the Prophet's family'. The Imam was frequently referred to by the scholars of Medina for persuasive answers to their questions, which covered various aspects of Islamic faith and law. Almost two centuries after the demise of the Prophet, Muslims were surrounded by many challenging questions about their beliefs and needed guidance from a divine source. This was also the case for the Shias who were constantly guided by the Shia Imams since the demise of the Prophet. The Shias had received high levels of teachings from Imam Baqir (AS) and Imam Sadiq (AS) about various aspects of the Islamic beliefs. However, more than 40 years had passed from the time they could freely access Imam Sadiq in Medina and ask him their questions. They were under an extremely oppressive regime during the end of Imam Sadiq's life and over the long Imamate of Imam Kazim. Towards the end of Haroon's government, there was a great opportunity for Muslims to access Imam Reza and ask him their questions with relative freedom. For around five years, during the government of Amin, the Imam had a good opportunity. This was the calmest period of Imam Reza's Imamate, and he used it effectively to guide Muslims and openly spread Shia theology.

Imam Reza trained many notable scholars during his Imamate, six of which are among the most authentic companions of the Shia Imams. These scholars have recorded precious narrations from both Imam Reza and Imam Kazim. These six scholars, along with six of Imam Baqir's companions and six of Imam Sadiq's companions, are known as 'As-haab-e-Ejma' or 'the companions of the consensus'. These 18 companions are the most trusted companions of the Shia Imams whose narrations are currently regarded with the highest level of authenticity and trust by the Shia scholars in seminaries.

## **8-4-During the Government of Ma'mun**

### **8-4-1-The Alavid Uprisings**

About five years after Haroon's death, Ma'mun was finally able to oust Amin from power and take control over the entire Abbasid territory. However, his government remained unstable, and various uprisings and riots kept threatening his power. The main threat to his government was led by the Alavids, who had viewed the Abbasids as an illegitimate government since their establishment. The term 'Alavids' refers to the children of Imam Ali (AS), which also includes the Prophet's descendants from his daughter, Lady Fatimah (SA). The Shia Imams were also from the Alavids.

The Alavid uprisings were initiated in Kufa by one of the descendants of Imam Hasan, known as Ibn Tabataba. Ibn Tabataba initially met Abul-Saraya, one of Ma'mun's former military leaders who had separated from Ma'mun's army due to a financial conflict. Ibn Tabataba, as the spiritual leader, and Abul-Saraya, as the army leader, led a joint uprising in Kufa, the center of the Shias. They were able to quickly gather many supporters for their cause, including the Zaidi Shias. They seized Kufa and took it under their control. Shortly after the victory, Ibn Tabataba died suspiciously<sup>104</sup>. Some believe that he was eliminated by Abul-Saraya, who then became the sole powerful leader of the uprising. After seizing Kufa, Abul-Saraya sent delegates to the other cities to encourage them to join his uprising. Soon, his uprising expanded to the other cities including Mecca, Medina, Yemen, Basrah, Madain, and Ahvaz, and became a serious threat for Mamun's newly established government. The governors of the seized cities were selected from among the Prophet's descendants. Imam Reza's brothers, Ibrahim, Zaid, and Isma'il became the governors of Yemen, Ahvaz, and Fars, respectively. After nearly ten challenging months, Ma'mun was able to defeat these widespread uprisings.

Imam Reza did not approve nor comment on the Alavid uprisings,

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<sup>104</sup> Rajab, 199 AH (Imam's age: 50)

though his close family members, including his own brothers, participated in them. Obviously, the Imam could not support these uprisings led by someone like Abul-Saraya, who was seeking his own power. The nominated governor for Medina during the Alavid uprisings was Muhammad ibn Sulayman, one of the descendants of Imam Hasan (AS). The majority of the Prophet's descendants and the other members of Banu Hashim accepted him as the governor and paid allegiance to him. They then sent the head of their army as a messenger to Imam Reza and asked for his allegiance to Muhammad ibn Sulayman. The Imam requested some time and postponed his decision for 20 days. After exactly 18 days, the Abbasid troops defeated the Alavid uprising in Medina and retook control of the city. On that day, the Imam saw the messenger who had asked for his allegiance in the street as he was fleeing. The Imam called him by his name and asked him if his requested time period of 20 days was over.

#### **8-4-2-Ma'mun's Plot for the Imam**

Although Ma'mun was finally able to defeat the widespread Alavid uprisings, he could not put an end to the long-standing conflict between the Alavids and the Abbasids, which had existed since the establishment of the Abbasid government for more than 60 years. During this time, the Alavids rose up against the Abbasid's oppression in various uprisings, including those of Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya and his brother, Ibrahim, the uprising of Hossein ibn Ali, the martyr of Fakh, the establishment of the Idrisid government in North-Western Africa, and the most recent uprising by Ibn Tabataba, which quickly expanded to various cities in Iraq and Hijaz. The potential for future uprisings by the Alavids was a serious threat to Ma'mun's government and the future of the Abbasids.

The Shia Imams, who were also Alavids, were against the Abbasids and never endorsed their government. Ma'mun had witnessed that his father's harsh and severe policies against Imam Kazim could not stop the Imam from opposing the Abbasid government. Instead, the Shia followers of the Imam grew so much that they even reached critical

government positions.

Ma'mun realized that years of restrictions, oppression, and enforcement upon the Alavids could not eliminate their threats. Thus, Ma'mun, who is known as the most strategic caliph among the Abbasid caliphs, decided to find an innovative solution for dealing with the potential threat of the Alavids. He decided to appoint one of the Alavids into his government. This person could not be anyone but Imam Reza, who was the most well-known person among the Alavids for all of the Muslims. Imam Reza was recognized for his divine knowledge among the Muslims due to his scientific work in Medina. He was the spiritual leader and the Imam for the Shia Muslims.

This plot could provide various benefits for Ma'mun and his government. Firstly, the threat of the Alavid uprisings against Ma'mun would cease, as a representative from the Alavids would be associated with the government. The Alavids would no longer be able to introduce the Abbasids as an illegitimate government to the people and could not recruit an army for any future uprisings. Secondly, Ma'mun's government would be legitimized for Muslims, as it would be regarded as a union between the Abbasids and the Alavids. Thirdly, Imam Reza's affiliation with the government would put his spiritual and infallible character in question among Muslims by portraying the Imam as a worldly and materialistic individual. The Imam would also be held responsible for the injustices and the oppression from the government. Lastly, Ma'mun would be able to separate Imam Reza from the people and reduce his influence on their hearts. He could fully supervise the Imam's activities and would prohibit his potential to initiate any independent uprising against the Abbasids. Ma'mun kept his plot to himself and did not inform anyone of his true intentions.

The only main opposition to this plot was from the Abbasid royal family, who did not want to lose their influence in the government. They had opposed and betrayed Ma'mun in the past and supported Amin's decision to remove Ma'mun as his successor, though they had pledged allegiance to it during the time of Haroon. They had also



supported Amin in his wars against Ma'mun, so Ma'mun was not intimidated by their opposition. Instead, he wanted to instill fear in their hearts and demonstrate that he had enough power to stand without them.

To implement his plot, Ma'mun sent a letter to Imam Reza in Medina and invited him to his capital, the city of Merv. Imam Reza was fully aware of Ma'mun's conspiracy and plot, so he rejected his invitation. Ma'mun sent other invitations, repeatedly insisting that the Imam travel to meet him in Merv. The Imam rejected Ma'mun's invitations each time, but could not change his decision. Finally, Ma'mun sent military delegates to Medina to bring the Imam to Merv. Imam Reza realized that Ma'mun would not give up and he was forced to travel to Merv with Ma'mun's delegation.

#### **8-4-3-Farewell to Medina**

Before leaving Medina, Imam Reza made a series of unprecedented actions to make it clear to everyone that his invitation to Merv was a conspiracy against him, and that he did not want to travel there. When the Imam bid farewell to his family, he asked them to cry loudly for him and informed them that this would be their last meeting. The Imam then held the hand of his five year old son, Imam Javad, and visited the tomb of the Prophet to pray for protection. Imam Reza then asked his companions and representatives to obey Imam Javad. He revealed Imam Javad as his successor in the Imamate. Also, when the Imam visited the Prophet's tomb to bid farewell, he cried loudly, and he repeatedly returned to the tomb while doing so. At that time, someone approached the Imam and congratulated him on his invitation by the Caliph. The Imam did not accept his greeting and told him, "I will be taken far away from the vicinity of my grandfather, the Prophet, and will pass away in a distant place and will be buried by Haroon's tomb."

#### **8-4-4-Travel to Merv<sup>105</sup>**

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<sup>105</sup> Began at 25 Zu al-Qa'dah, 200 AH (Imam's age: 52)

Ma'mun had advised his military delegates to avoid passing by the Shia dominated cities of the time, Kufa and Qom. The people of Kufa had led multiple rebellions against the Umayyads and the Abbasids in the past. The Alavid uprising in Kufa had been suppressed in months prior to the Imam's travel. Qom was also the main center for the Shias in Iran. Also, traveling with the Imam through Baghdad, the center of the Abbasid royal family, was not a wise decision either, as the royal family and their supporters were hostile toward both Ma'mun and the Imam. Therefore, the delegates avoided traveling on the common route of that time, which was from Medina to Merv, and passed by the cities of Kufa, Baghdad, and Qom. Instead, they travelled a more difficult route passing through the hostile deserts of central Iran.

The Imam's itinerary from Medina to Merv was about 3,450 kilometers, and the journey took approximately six months. Today, this route is divided amongst five countries: 850 kilometers in Saudi Arabia, 200 kilometers bordering Kuwait and Iraq, 150 kilometers in Iraq, 2,100 kilometers in Iran, and 150 kilometers in Turkmenistan. The Imam's travel route in Iran is currently known as 'Wilayat Road'. After more than 1,200 years, many historical monuments are still affiliated with the Imam along this route, and are regarded respectfully by the local citizens who honor the Imam's presence in the locations.

After Basrah, the Imam's caravan entered the border of current day Iran from Shalamcheh. Shortly after, the caravan arrived in Ahvaz. The Imam became sick in Ahvaz due to the high temperatures and excessive humidity of the city, so he stayed there for a while to recover.

The Imam's divine character influenced many who interacted with him during this long journey. The Imam's caravan obeyed Ma'mun's order to follow a route that limited the Imam's ability to interact with the locals and any people along the way. However, the members of the caravan witnessed the Imam's piety and long prayers during this long journey. One member of the caravan who was greatly influenced by the Imam was Abasalt Heravi, who went on to become one of the Imam's closest companions. Later, when Rajaa ibn Abi-Zahhak, the

delegation's leader, told Ma'mun about his observations of the Imam's prayers and divine character, Ma'mun asked him to keep his observations secret and to not reveal them to the public.

Neyshabur was the biggest city in the region, with a Sunni-dominated population and the well-established school of Hadith. The news of the Imam's arrival in Neyshabur had spread in the city, but the people could not openly contact the Imam due to the enforced protection around him by the military. When the caravan was leaving the city, the people saw an ideal opportunity to meet the Imam, so they came in large numbers to the city's gate and surrounded the Imam's caravan. A few Islamic scholars approached the caravan. They called out to the Imam and asked him to show his face for the sake of his forefathers. They asked him to benefit them with a narration from the Prophet that had been passed to him by his forefathers. They told the Imam that they wanted to save his narration as a memory from his visit to their city.

The Imam asked the caravan to stop, opened the curtains, and let people see his face to which they cried tears of joy. The people advised each other to remain silent to allow the Imam to speak. The Imam recited a narration from his father who had heard it from his father. The Imam then named all of his forefathers up to the Prophet as the chain of narrators for his narration. The Imam said that the Prophet had heard this narration from the angel Gabriel, who had heard it from God. The Imam said, "God says the monotheistic expression of "La-Ilaha-Illal-lah" ("No God but Allah") is His fortress, and anyone who enters His fortress will be protected from His punishment." The caravan was ordered to continue on its way, as they did not want to allow the Imam to have any interaction with the people. While moving, the Imam addressed the crowd and said, "This narration is true under some conditions and I am one of the conditions." With this concise narration, the Imam introduced his Imamatus as a requirement to enter God's fortress. After decades of continuous oppression of the Shias, the Imam used this opportunity to directly speak to the crowd of the Muslims about the Shia's key concept of Imamatus. The Imam's narration is known

as ‘Hadith al-Silsilah al-Dhahab’, which means ‘The Narration of the Golden Chain’, in which the chain refers to the Imam’s divine forefathers who connect him to the Prophet. The number of people who heard and recorded the Imam’s narration was estimated to be more than 20,000.

The Imam’s caravan continued on its route. When the Imam’s caravan reached Deh Sorkh, the Imam asked for water to perform ablution for the noon prayer, but there was no water in the caravan. The Imam then dug into the soil with his hands, and a spring miraculously appeared. The Imam and the others then prayed there.

Shortly after Deh Sorkh, the caravan stopped at a location known as Kooh Sangi. The Imam leaned on the cliffs of the mountain, which was used by the locals to make stone pots. The Imam prayed for this mountain to be blessed, as well as anything cooked in these stone pots.

Shortly after, the Imam’s caravan stopped at Haroon’s tomb. At this location, the Imam marked a line on the ground next to the tomb of Haroon and revealed it as his own grave. He said, “God will make this location a place for the gathering of my Shia followers and friends.” He then swore by God, “Anyone of them who visits my grave or salutes me, will be blessed by God’s mercy and forgiveness.” The Imam prayed there and ended his prayers with a long prostration.

After around six months, the Imam’s caravan finally entered Merv<sup>106</sup>, where Ma’mun welcomed the Imam.

#### **8-4-5-The Imam as Ma’mun’s Crown Prince**

After the Imam had taken a short rest from the long journey, Ma’mun revealed his real intention for bringing the Imam to Merv. In a meeting, he told the people, “I found no one better than Ali ibn Musa (Imam Reza) for the Caliphate among the entire Abbasid and Alavid family so I want to pass the caliphate to him.” The Imam was aware of Ma’mun’s real intentions and refused to accept his offer. He responded to

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<sup>106</sup> 10 Jumada al-Thani, 201 AH (Imam’s age: 52)

Ma'mun, "If the Caliphate belongs to you, you should not pass it to someone else; and if it does not belong to you, you do not have the right to pass it to someone else." No one would believe that Ma'mun, who had fought for more than two years with his own brother and had killed him to gain power, would let his power go to someone else. Ma'mun wanted to make the Imam the spiritual leader for the Caliphate and to keep the real power for himself. He wanted to use the Imam's name to make any decisions and to influence the hearts of the people.

Over the course of about two months, there were multiple discussions between Ma'mun and the Imam about his offer to the Imam for the caliphate. Ma'mun, who faced the Imam's stern rejection, instead proposed to appoint the Imam as his successor, or the Crown Prince, in the Caliphate. Ma'mun had not chosen any of his sons as his successor since defeating Amin, so people were expecting him to choose someone for this position. However, the Imam's nomination as the crown prince was very unusual for the public, because the Imam was about 22 years older than Ma'mun. Everyone was expecting a younger person than the Caliph to be chosen as the crown prince, since he was supposed to inherit the Caliphate after the Caliph. The Imam rejected the proposal to be the Crown Prince. However, Ma'mun, who had lost his patience, threatened to kill the Imam. He told the Imam, "The second Caliph formed a council with six of the Prophet's companions in order to choose the third Caliph, and one of them was your forefather, Ali ibn Abi-Talib. The second Caliph ordered the beheading of anyone of the six who disagreed with the outcome of the council." Ma'mun threatened to have similar treatment to the Imam if he refused to accept his proposal to be the crown prince.

Ma'mun left the Imam with only two choices, either accepting his offer or being killed. Thus, the Imam was forced to accept Ma'mun's offer<sup>107</sup>. However, he accepted with the following conditions. The Imam said he would not appoint or oust any governmental agents, and he would not change any governmental legislations. The Imam emphasized that his

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<sup>107</sup> 7 Ramazan, 201 AH (Imam's age: 52)

role would only be to observe governmental affairs from a distance, and would only serve as a consultant. Ma'mun immediately accepted the Imam's conditions with the hope that he could later further involve him in the government.

Ma'mun wrote the official document to appoint Imam Reza as his crown prince. In the document, he emphasized the elevated status of the Imam. Imam Reza then annotated the back of the official document. He explicitly wrote, "Ma'mun has appointed me as his crown prince to gain his power after him if I am alive." It appears that the Imam wanted to imply that he would not be alive after Ma'mun.

Ma'mun set up a big ceremony, where all of the high ranking political and military officials were in attendance. He asked them to change the color of their outfits from black, which represented the Abbasid government, to green. Although green was not known as the Alavid flag at the time, it became known as the Alavid flag later in history. Ma'mun then called the Imam with the title "Reza", which referred to the famous slogan, 'al-Reza min Ale-Muhammad', which the Alavids used during their uprisings against the Abbasids. Ma'mun wanted to emphasize that the person chosen from the Prophet's family, who had consensus for the Caliphate, was none other than Imam Reza.

Ma'mun asked everyone to pay allegiance to the Imam as his Crown Prince. The first one to pay allegiance to the Imam was Abbas, one of Ma'mun's sons who had been a candidate for becoming the crown prince. Then, all of the other governmental representatives and the people followed. Everyone who was present paid allegiance, except for three officials, whom Ma'mun then ordered to be imprisoned.

Ma'mun distributed gifts amongst the audience and paid a one year's salary in advance to his troops. The poets and preachers performed in celebration. Ma'mun then asked the Imam to deliver a speech to benefit the people. The Imam delivered a very short speech that conveyed his dissatisfaction. He praised God and then said, "O' people, we have rights over you due to our close relation with the Prophet and in turn, you have rights over us too. If you fulfill our rights, it is obligatory for

us to fulfill your rights.”

After the ceremony, Ma'mun sent letters around the Islamic territory and informed the people about the appointment of his crown prince. He ordered the Imam's name to be recited along with his name in the Friday sermons. He asked his governmental officials across the Islamic territory to wear green outfits instead of their black ones which represented the Abbasids. He also ordered new coins with the imprinted names of himself as the Caliph and the Imam as his Crown Prince. As a result, the Imam became a very well-known person around the Islamic territory.

#### **8-4-6-After Appointment as the Crown Prince**

Shortly after the Imam's appointment as the Crown Prince, Ma'mun asked the Imam to propose someone from among his loyal companions as a governor for one of the regions with unrest. His intention was to use the Imam's reputation and influence on the hearts of the people to control the turmoil in parts of his government. The Imam opposed this request by reminding Ma'mun of his condition for accepting his position, which included not to appoint nor oust any governmental representatives. Ma'mun realized the Imam's strong stance and gave up on his request. Although the Imam had been forced to accept his own governmental position, he never allowed Ma'mun to misuse him for his political gains.

Ma'mun tried to portray that his government was a joint government between the Abbasids and the Alavids. He arranged for some marriages between the two families, and appointed some of the Alavids to governmental positions. For instance, he appointed the Imam's brother, Ibrahim, as the governor of Yemen and chose him as the head organizer of the Hajj that year.

Zaid was one of Imam Reza's brothers who joined the Alavid uprisings without the Imam's consent. He led one of the Alavid uprisings and took control of the city of Basrah. He killed the Abbasids and whoever was affiliated with them, and set their houses on fire. Due to the

atrocities he inflicted, he was named 'Zaid al-Naar' or 'Zaid, the Fire'. His uprising in Basrah was eventually defeated by the Abbasid army. He was arrested and sent to Ma'mun in Merv. Ma'mun had just selected Zaid's brother, Imam Reza, as his Crown Prince. Thus, he freed Zaid, but he informed the Imam that he had done so only because of the Imam. He also told the Imam, "Your brother followed the tradition of Zaid ibn Ali who had risen up in the past." The Imam disagreed with Ma'mun's comparison between his brother and Zaid ibn Ali, the son of Imam Sajjad (AS). The Imam said, "Zaid ibn Ali was a scholar from the Prophet's family and his intention for the uprising was for the sake of God." The Imam then addressed his brother and condemned his actions. The Imam told him that his affiliation to the Prophet would not help him in the hereafter, and that he would be held responsible for his wrongdoings.

When the Imam had no choice but to forcefully accept Ma'mun's appointment as the crown prince, he was criticized by some people, including his own Shia followers. The Imam's situation was very similar to Imam Hasan's when he had been criticized by his Shia followers after accepting the peace treaty with Muawiyah. Both Imam Hasan and Imam Reza had put conditions on accepting the situations forced on them as a sign of their resistance. Imam Reza responded in various ways to these criticisms. Once, he responded, "My action is similar to my forefather, Imam Ali, when he participated in the council of six of the Prophet's companions to select the third Caliph." The Imam implied that both of them had accepted their political roles due to their life-threatening situations. On another occasion, the Imam reminded them about Prophet Joseph's decision to voluntarily accept the position of a treasurer of the land due to the critical circumstances of his time. The Imam then recited the following relevant verse of the Quran [12:55]: "[Joseph] said, Appoint me over the storehouses of the land. Indeed, I will be a knowing guardian." The Imam told them, "Prophet Joseph accepted his position voluntarily while I accepted it forcefully." On another occasion, the Imam said that he did not have any choice but to accept the appointment. The Imam then continued, "If you stay patient,



you will witness that I will never attain the Caliphate in the future.”

#### **8-4-7-The Imam as the Divine Leader**

Three weeks after the Imam’s appointment as the Crown Prince, Eid al-Fitr was observed<sup>108</sup>. Ma’mun asked the Imam to lead the Eid prayer for the people of Merv. The Imam refused by reminding Ma’mun of his condition for accepting the appointment, which was not to be involved in any governmental role. Ma’mun insisted by saying that his intention was for the people to see the Imam’s greatness and to confess to his merit. The Imam accepted Ma’mun’s offer with the condition of performing the Eid prayer according to the traditions of his forefathers, the Prophet and Imam Ali, which Ma’mun accepted. The news of the Imam leading the Eid prayer spread quickly in the city.

On the day of Eid, the Imam exited his house by sunrise in a simple outfit while he was barefoot. The Imam’s simple clothing and his loud tekbihs of the Eid prayer made an impact on the people. They had been expecting to see someone with luxurious clothing surrounded by bodyguards, similar to other high-ranking officials. Tears began to roll down from their eyes, and they followed the Imam by taking their own shoes off. The army leaders and soldiers waiting for the Imam also dismounted their horses, took off their shoes, and followed the Imam barefoot. The Imam would stop every ten steps and loudly recite the tekbihs of the Eid prayer. The people would then stop and recite tekbihs right after the Imam’s recitations. The loud tekbihs of the huge crowd following the Imam resonated across the city. Fazl ibn Sahl warned Ma’mun that if the Imam continued the Eid prayer, the people would become his devotees and it was better to have him return so Ma’mun sent someone to bring the Imam back. The Imam wore his shoes, boarded his ride, and returned before even starting the Eid prayer. The Eid prayer was performed as usual by someone who had led the prayers during the previous years. The Eid prayer was going to be performed with magnificence as a sign of Muslim unity, but instead was performed

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<sup>108</sup> 1 Shawwal, 201 AH (Imam’s age: 52)

without much glory.

During the Imam's stay in Merv, a severe drought hit the region. Many who had hatred for the Imam attributed the drought to the Imam's presence and his appointment as the Crown Prince. As a result, Ma'mun asked the Imam to pray for rain. The Imam accepted Ma'mun's request, and said that he would perform the prayer for rain after three days. On the promised day, the Imam exited the city and went to the desert with a crowd of Muslims following him. The Imam delivered a speech and addressed God. Among his words, he said "O' God, You are the one who has rewarded us, the Ahlul-Bayt, with a great position. As You have ordered, these people have referred to us to fulfill their requests. They request Your Mercy and are seeking Your Blessings and Beneficence. O' God, quench their thirst with a beneficial rain that does not harm them and send it after the people have returned from the desert to their homes." After the Imam's speech, strong winds began to blow, dark clouds covered the sky, and sounds of thunder filled the air. As per the Imam's prayer, the rain did not begin until the people returned to their homes. Then a heavy rain covered the area. By witnessing this miracle, the people publicly admitted to the Imam's dignity in the eyes of God. After the rain, the Imam delivered another speech in the city to the people. He advised them to be pious and urged them to admit the elevated rights of the Prophet's family. He also advised them to practically appreciate and have gratitude for God's blessings by helping the other Muslims.

#### **8-4-8-Travel to Meet the Imam**

While the Imam was in Merv, some well-known individuals travelled to meet him. Poetry was the greatest source of media at the time and had deep influence on the hearts of the people. The poets would travel to Merv to recite their poetry in praise of Ma'mun and his Crown Prince, the Imam, in hopes of receiving a reward from Ma'mun. Also, the Shia poets could now publicly recite their poetry without having any fear of persecution from the government.

De'bel Khuzaei was a famous Shia poet who travelled to Merv to visit

the Imam without any monetary expectations. He told the Imam that he had written poetry for him and had not recited it to anyone before. He wanted the Imam to be the first person to hear it. He recited his poetry in the eulogy of the Ahlul-Bayt, describing the oppression against them. He ended his poetry by addressing Lady Fatimah to resurrect from her tomb and mourn at the tombs of her children who were martyred in various locations. The last tomb that was mentioned in the poetry was Imam Kazim's tomb in Baghdad. At this time, Imam Reza asked permission from De'bel to add and complete his poetry and De'bel happily accepted. The Imam then recited the following line of poetry, "(O' Lady Fatimah) a tomb (of one of your children) will also be in Tus, whose tragedy will be horrible and agonizing until God raises the promised one (Mahdi) who will remove our sadness and sorrow." De'bel then asked the Imam about the tomb in Tus and to whom it belonged. The Imam responded, "It will be my tomb and soon Tus will become a place for my followers and pilgrims." When the Imam gave a reward to De'bel, he said, "I didn't recite my poetry for monetary purposes." Instead, he asked for one item of the Imam's clothing, which the Imam granted to him.

Ma'mun had transported the Imam alone from Medina to Merv, and had never wanted his family to join him. This could be attributed to the fact that he had malicious intentions for the Imam from the beginning. Ma'mun had thought that it would be harder for him to eliminate the Imam in the presence of his family. While the Imam's own family needed Ma'mun's permission to travel to Merv, the other members of the Imam's extended family could travel to Merv freely. One of the Imam's family members who decided to travel from Medina to Merv to visit him was his sister, Lady Masoumeh (SA). She was worried about her beloved brother so shortly after the Imam's travel to Merv, Lady Masoumeh left Medina with a Hajj caravan that was returning to current day Iran. Unlike the Imam's caravan, which followed Ma'mun's order to travel through a route from the deserts of central Iran, Lady Masoumeh's caravan followed the usual route of that time, which passed by Kufa and Qom. Although she was eagerly waiting to meet

her brother in Merv, she became sick in Saveh. She asked for help to move her to Qom, which was not far, as she had heard from her father, Imam Kazim, that the city of Qom was a center for the Shias. After 17 days of staying in Qom, she passed away<sup>109</sup> and was buried in the city. She was so elevated in piety that Imam Reza recommended to visit and pay respects to her, and promised a heavenly reward for anyone who would visit her tomb in Qom.

#### **8-4-9-The Imam's Debates**

The Imam's presence in Khorasan was a great opportunity for the locals to directly ask him questions. Ma'mun himself also asked many questions from the Imam in public and private meetings. Ma'mun, who himself was knowledgeable in the Islamic faith, had asked the Imam many questions regarding the interpretations of the Quran, the traditions of the Prophet, and the fundamentals of the Shia belief. The Imam provided him with convincing answers.

Ma'mun arranged a series of debates in his palace between the Imam and the well-known Islamic and non-Islamic scholars. His intention was to defeat and disgrace the Imam during the scientific debates. If Ma'mun would have been able to fulfill his intention, he would have ruined the Imam's reputation in the eyes of the Muslims, who respected the Imam for his endless knowledge. In the most famous debate, Ma'mun gathered the leaders of Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Sabians in his palace. He held a grand official event for their debate with the Imam. Crowds of people and government officials attended. The Imam knew that there would not be a common ground with the leaders of the other religions for the debate, because they would deny the Imam's reasoning with Quranic evidence and the traditions of the Holy Prophet. To everyone's surprise, the Imam debated each of the leaders according to their respective holy books. The Imam demonstrated that his knowledge was not limited to Islamic resources, and that he was more knowledgeable than the leaders in their own teachings.

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<sup>109</sup> 10 Rabi' al-Thani, 201 (Imam's age: 52)

The Imam first debated with the Christian leader. The Christian leader asked him to bring two witnesses who had testified to the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and were approved by the Christians. The Imam recited parts of the Gospel in which Prophet Jesus and his apostle had spoken about the last Prophet. During the debate, the Imam said that he believed in Prophet Jesus, but had only found one flaw about him. The Imam said that Prophet Jesus did not pray or fast much. The Christian leader surprisingly responded, “You are wrong because he fasted every day and prayed every night.” The Imam then asked him, “If that was the case, who was he praying to and fasting for?” Through this, the Imam challenged the Christian belief that Prophet Jesus is God’s manifestation on earth, because if he were God, he would not pray to himself. With the Imam’s reasoning, the leader became silent.

The Imam then asked the Christian leader why he denied that Prophet Jesus was able to give life to the dead with God’s power rather than with his own. The leader responded that someone who could raise the dead and heal the blind was indeed God himself, and deserved worship. The Imam then brought forth multiple cases of evidence from the Gospel, Torah, Psalms, and Quran where the other Prophets such as Elisha, Ezekiel, Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad (PBUH) also performed miracles of resurrecting the dead. The Imam himself recited the related parts from Torah and the Jewish leader was astonished by the Imam’s clear recitation of the Torah. At the end of their debate, the Christian leader confessed that there was no such scholar among the Muslims like the Imam.

The Imam then debated with the Jewish leader, who asked the Imam to provide proof from the Torah that Muhammad was a Prophet. The Imam recited a few verses from the Torah that described the coming of Prophet Muhammad near Mount Faran, close to Mecca. He also recited Prophet Moses’ statement in which he addressed the Israelites about the forthcoming news of a Prophet from the children of Prophet Isma’il. He then recited a verse from Prophet David in the Psalms and a verse from Prophet Jesus in the Gospel about Prophet Muhammad.

The Imam then asked the Jewish leader why the Jews did not believe in the miracles of the other Prophets after Prophet Moses. The leader responded that they would not accept any miracles other than those similar to what Prophet Moses had brought to them. The Imam then challenged him in their belief of the Prophets before Prophet Moses, who had brought different miracles than him. The leader could not respond to the Imam's reasoning and became silent.

The Imam then asked the Zoroastrian leader about their beliefs. The leader said, "Zoroaster brought us miracles that no one had brought us before him. He legalized some things for us that were forbidden before." The Imam asked him, "Is it not the case that you are following Zoroaster just because you have received some news about him from your ancestors?" and the leader agreed. The Imam then said, "This is not an acceptable reason for your belief, as the followers of the other religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have also received similar news from their ancestors about the miracles of their Prophet." The Zoroastrian leader could not offer a stronger reasoning for their belief in Zoroaster and became silent.

The Imam then asked if there was anyone amongst the audience who was against Islam and willing to ask questions. Emran Sabei, one of the most famous debaters of his time, stood up and started a long philosophical debate with the Imam regarding God and His attributes. In the middle of their debate, the time of prayer set in, and the Imam stopped the debate to perform his prayer. At this time, Emran asked the Imam to continue their debate, as his heart had softened toward the Imam's guidance, but the Imam did not accept his request. After a short break for the prayers, the Imam returned, and they continued their debate until Emran fell into prostration and converted to Islam. After this incident, no other scholars stepped forward to debate with the Imam, as they all knew that Emran was a strong debater. The Imam left after a long day of debate. Later, Emran became one of the Imam's companions.

Ma'mun arranged multiple other debates between the Imam and the

other scholars of the time in hopes of defeating the Imam. Once, Ma'mun brought Sulayman Marvzi, a strong philosopher and debater, to debate with the Imam. Ma'mun had told Sulayman that if he could defeat the Imam in just one topic, he had served his purpose. The Imam had a long philosophical debate with Sulayman regarding God and His attributes. During the debate, Sulayman did not want to accept defeat and started to contradict his own words. His contradictions caused Ma'mun and the audience to laugh.

On another occasion, the Imam debated with Ali ibn Jahm, who used Quranic verses to reject the infallibility of the Prophets. The Imam answered all of his doubts and provided him with the correct interpretation of the Quranic verses that he quoted. The Imam then narrated the true historical facts about the lives of the Prophets that demonstrated their infallibility. Ali ibn Jahm was convinced by the Imam's response, realized his mistake of misinterpreting the Quran, and cried in repentance.

On yet another occasion, Ma'mun gathered scholars from various sects of Islam to debate with the Imam. They debated with the Imam about various topics, including the Shia concept of Imamat. The Imam responded to their questions with convincing Quranic and logical answers. During the debate, one of them asked about the signs of validating the true Imam. The Imam responded, "One can confirm that someone is the true Imam with two signs: his (divine) knowledge and the fulfilment of his prayers (by God)."

#### **8-4-10-The Imam's Scientific Contribution**

The Imam's stay in Merv was the golden period of his Imamatus, as he had an exceptional opportunity to spread his knowledge, as well as Shia theology. The Imam's role as Crown Prince had officially made him the second top person in the government. After around 160 years from the time of Imam Ali and Imam Hasan, who had both been able to publicly speak as Muslim caliphs, only Imam Reza from the Shia Imams spoke from a governmental position. Many of the Imam's speeches, his responses to the questions, and his debates with the scholars had been

witnessed by the people and are recorded in history. These records are currently regarded as precious resources in the Islamic seminaries. Many of these records are available in the book named ‘Oyoun Akhbar al-Reza’.

There were multiple documents written by Imam Reza during his stay at Merv, and they are still available today. For example, ‘Javaame’ al-Shariah’ was written by the Imam in response to Ma’mun asking him for an abstract about pure Islam. In this document, with no fear of Ma’mun, the Imam explicitly reviewed the main principles of the Islamic faith, including the Shia belief of the Imamat. The Imam’s response also contained the answer to tens of questions regarding various aspects of the Islamic law. In a letter, the Imam also responded to questions asked by Muhammad ibn Sinan, one of his companions, about the logical reasoning behind various Islamic laws including the ritual bath (ghusl), ablution, zakat, Hajj, fasting, trading laws, and halal meat.

Another document that is attributed to the Imam is ‘Al-Risalah al-Dhahabiah’ or ‘The Golden Treatise’ in medicine. The Imam wrote this Risalah in response to Ma’mun asking the Imam to document his recommendations in medicine. When Ma’mun received the Imam’s Risalah, he became delighted and ordered for it to be written in golden ink.

### **8-4-11-The Imam’s Life in Merv**

Although the Imam held the highest governmental position after Ma’mun, his lifestyle was quite simple, and his interaction with the people was humble, as usual. With his behavior, the Imam showed his detachment from this material world. Once, the Imam donated his entire wealth in the way of God on the Day of Arafah. Fazl ibn Sahl was shocked by the Imam’s action, and told the Imam that his action was a loss. The Imam responded, “My donation is indeed a profit and whatever gains God’s reward is not a loss.”

One of the goals of Ma’mun’s plot in bringing the Imam to Merv was



to isolate him from the people and his followers. He also wanted to prohibit the potential for any independent uprising by the Imam. However, the event during the Eid prayer showed Ma'mun that if he did not restrict the Imam's interactions with the people, they would be attracted toward the Imam, so Ma'mun put the Imam's life under intense surveillance. He deceived Hisham ibn Ibrahim, one of the Imam's close companions and his representative in Medina who had travelled to Merv, by appointing him as the doorkeeper of the Imam. Hisham would report any of the Imam's meetings and any word that the Imam had spoken inside his house to Ma'mun and Fazl ibn Sahl. He would also restrict the Imam's followers and companions from meeting him freely. A year after the Imam's arrival in Merv, Ma'mun proposed his daughter, Um-Habib, to the Imam and insisted that the Imam marry her. By this political marriage, Ma'mun was able to monitor all aspects of the Imam's private life, but even this marriage could not bring the Imam to favor Ma'mun and his government.

#### **8-4-12-Ma'mun Defeated in his Plot**

As time passed, Ma'mun realized that he could not defeat nor defame the Imam in any debate. Instead, the news of the Imam's victory in the debates spread across the Islamic territory and led to even more popularity and respect for the Imam. Ma'mun had to find a way to distract the Muslims from being attracted to the Imam and his divine knowledge. He had established a good relationship with the neighboring countries as a policy to overcome the internal problems in his government, such as the war with Amin and the Alavid uprisings, so he ordered abundant translations of foreign literature, such as Greek philosophy, into Arabic. He then spread the translations among the Muslims in hopes of distracting them from favoring the Imam's knowledge.

A year after appointing the Imam as his Crown Prince, Ma'mun realized that his plots against the Imam were unsuccessful. The only benefit from his decision during this time was a temporary halt in the Alavid uprisings against his government. Ma'mun could not defame the Imam

nor justify his decisions using the Imam's name, as the Imam always kept himself distant from Ma'mun and his government. With his wise actions, the Imam made his position an invaluable opportunity to spread Shia theology through the Islamic territory. Ironically, the main positive outcome from the Imam's appointment as the Crown Prince was that after decades of hostility against the Shia Imams, for the first time, the Islamic caliph and the government had to confess to the elevated status of the Shia Imams. This outcome proved the authenticity of the Shia theology to the Muslims around the Islamic territory and accelerated their familiarity with it. Across the Islamic territory, the Imam was regarded with respect as the Crown Prince. The Shias, who had always hid their belief in fear for their lives, were now proudly declaring and spreading their belief. Ma'mun had hoped to disgrace the Imam's divine character by affiliating him to his government, and was now witnessing the opposite outcome from what he had intended. The Imam's interactions with the people filled their hearts with love and respect for him to an extent that many of the people believed that the Imam had much more merit for the caliphate than Ma'mun. Also, the Imam's debates with the greatest Muslim and non-Muslim scholars of the time proved his divine knowledge to the people. Therefore, Ma'mun could not find any way to stop the Imam other than to kill him.

One reason Ma'mun rushed to kill the Imam was the instability in Baghdad, the former capital of the Abbasids. The Abbasid royal family was outraged by Ma'mun's decision to appoint Imam Reza as his Crown Prince. They could not tolerate seeing the Abbasid government fall into the Alavid lineage in the future. They selected Ibrahim ibn Mahdi, one of their family members, as their chosen caliph and paid allegiance to him. Ibrahim ibn Mahdi was a corrupt character who was famous in public for his singing and intoxication.

Ma'mun decided to move to Baghdad to manage the instability in the city. He knew that the Abbasids would never approve of the Imam as the Crown Prince. They also considered Ma'mun's minister, Fazl ibn

Sahl, as their enemy and held him responsible for Ma'mun's wars with Amin, whom they had supported. Ma'mun believed that the Abbasids would still accept him as their caliph if he could address their excuse by killing both the Imam and Fazl ibn Sahl.

### **8-4-13-Martyrdom**

Ma'mun wanted to prepare a favorable environment in Baghdad ahead of his arrival, so he decided to eliminate Imam Reza and Fazl ibn Sahl without delay. Shortly after leaving Merv towards Baghdad, his caravan arrived in Sarakhs, which is the current day border between Iran and Turkmenistan. Ma'mun decided to implement his plot there. Fazl ibn Sahl decided to go to the bathhouse, and Ma'mun asked the Imam to accompany Fazl, but the Imam refused the request. When Ma'mun insisted, the Imam responded that he had seen the Prophet in his dream, and he had told him to not go to the bathhouse, so Ma'mun finally accepted. In the bathhouse, Fazl ibn Sahl was surrounded and murdered by Ma'mun's hidden agents. Shortly after this, Ma'mun's agents were arrested and brought to him. To prove his innocence in Fazl's murder, Ma'mun ordered the execution of his agents. When these agents were being taken for execution, they were crying aloud, saying that it was Ma'mun who had ordered them to murder Fazl.

Ma'mun and his army continued on their way towards Baghdad. They stopped by his father, Haroon's tomb, which was in a garden in the village of Sanabad near the city of Tus in Khorasan. At this place, Ma'mun decided to poison the Imam. He called the Imam into his presence and poisoned him with pomegranate juice or grapes. Imam Reza became the only Shia Imam who was directly poisoned by the hands of a Muslim caliph.

It can be inferred that the Imam was poisoned with a very detrimental and strong poison, because his poisoning was a political assassination and could not have been left incomplete. Ma'mun wanted to remove the Imam as soon as possible, since he wanted to continue his journey to Baghdad. It is highly possible that he had gotten the poison from the Romans, as he had a good relationship with them at that time. The

poison affected the Imam's body almost immediately. When the Imam left Ma'mun, he returned directly to his residence. He told his companion, Abasalt Heravi, to close all of the entrance doors since he was sick and could not meet anyone. The Imam then laid down on the bed.

When the Imam was on his deathbed, Ma'mun came to visit him. He told the Imam, "I don't know which tragedy is harder for me, losing you or the people's accusation that blame me for your condition." The Imam ignored Ma'mun's words. He opened his eyes and warned Ma'mun to treat his only child, Muhammad, well because both of them would die soon after the other.

During the last hours of the Imam's life, his companion, Abasalt Heravi, saw a young boy inside the Imam's residence. He came to the boy and asked him how he had entered the house since he had closed all of the entrance doors. The boy responded, "The Almighty, who had brought me from Medina to Tus in just a moment, entered me into the house through the closed door." Abasalt asked him who he was. The boy responded, "I am your Imam, Muhammad ibn Ali. I am here to meet and bid farewell to my lonely and poisoned father." When Imam Reza saw his seven-year-old son, he got up and hugged him. They talked in private for a while, until the Imam's soul ascended. Imam Reza was martyred on the last day of Safar in the year 203 of Hijri at the age of 54. He was martyred after holding the position of Crown Prince for only about one-and-a-half years.

Imam Muhammad ibn Ali (AS) known as 'Javad', performed his father's rituals alone. He washed and prayed on the Imam's body and then disappeared without anyone else noticing his presence.

When Ma'mun was informed about the Imam's martyrdom, he came to his residence. Ma'mun showed grief and sorrow to portray to the people that he was innocent in the Imam's martyrdom. He came barefoot and grieving at the Imam's burial. The burial was performed under the intense control of Ma'mun's army. It can be inferred that most of the attendees were from his army.

Ma'mun had decided to bury the Imam by his father, Haroon's, tomb. He ordered a grave dug for the Imam behind Haroon's tomb, but the earth did not open even after frequent attempts. His men then tried to dig a hole in the surrounding locations, and when they dug in front of Haroon's tomb, the earth opened, where they discovered a fully prepared grave. They did not hesitate, and buried the Imam in that grave, even though Ma'mun did not favor it.

After the Imam's martyrdom, Ma'mun sent a letter to the Abbasid royal family to inform them about the Imam's death. He asked them to obey him, as their animosity was only due to the Imam's appointment as the Crown Prince. He then continued his journey to Baghdad.

### **8-5-Conclusion**

The Imamate of Imam Reza began with the martyrdom of his father, Imam Kazim, and continued for almost 20 years until his own martyrdom. His Imamate was during the government of three Abbasid Caliphs: Haroon and two of his sons, Amin and Ma'mun. Half of his Imamate, for around 10 years, coincided with the government of Haroon, one of the most powerful Abbasid Caliphs. Initially, the Imam did not declare his Imamate, as it was strongly possible that Haroon would persecute him, similar to what he had done to the Imam's father, Imam Kazim. Later, the Imam publicly declared his Imamate. At that time, Haroon was overwhelmed by serious challenges in his government, including eliminating the powerful Barmaki family and suppressing the riots in the eastern parts of his government, so he did not find an opportunity to persecute the Imam. When Amin assumed power, a series of conflicts and battles occurred between him and his brother, Ma'mun. Amin's government was an exceptional opportunity for Imam Reza to publicly spread his knowledge for about five years, since Amin did not have any opportunity to put pressure on the Imam's activities in Medina. Imam Reza's Imamate continued into Ma'mun's government for around five years, until his martyrdom by Ma'mun himself.

The main incident during the Imamate of Imam Reza was his appointment as Ma'mun's Crown Prince. To fulfill his plot, Ma'mun brought the Imam from Medina to his capital in Merv and threatened the Imam to accept his proposal to be his Crown Prince. The Imam's nomination as the Crown Prince was a very unusual proposal, as the Imam was about 22 years older than Ma'mun. Everyone was expecting a younger person than the Caliph for the Crown Prince, as he would inherit the Caliphate after the Caliph. Ma'mun, with his well-planned and secret conspiracy, intended to eliminate Shi'ism entirely by showing the Imam as a worldly and materialistic individual, disgracing him in the eyes of Muslims. However, the Imam, with his wise decisions and behaviors, made Ma'mun's conspiracy ineffective. With his actions in Medina, the Imam made it clear to everyone that Ma'mun's invitation to Merv was a plot against him, and that he would not return to Medina. The Imam resisted accepting Ma'mun's offer to be his Crown Prince for about two months after his arrival in Merv. He was forced to accept the offer upon receiving life threats from Ma'mun. The Imam's conditions for accepting the position prevented Ma'mun from using the Imam's name and influence on the hearts of the people to justify his actions and decisions.

The Imam used his position to further expand the Shia theology. He used every opportunity to familiarize Muslims with his divine character and the Shia concept of the Imamate. He narrated the 'Hadith al-Silsilah al-Dhahab' to the crowds of Muslims in Neyshabur and emphasized the Shia's key concept of Imamate. He also led the Eid prayer and the rain prayer at Merv and demonstrated his divine character to the people. With his multiple debates, the Imam proved that he held divine knowledge and consolidated the Shia school of thought as a prominent sect in Islam with a strong scientific backbone. The main positive outcome from the Imam's appointment as the Crown Prince was that, after decades of hostility against the Shia Imams, ironically for the first time, the Islamic Caliph and the government now had to confess to the elevated status of the Shia Imams. This outcome proved the truth of the Shia theology to the Muslims across the Islamic territory, and

accelerated their familiarity with the Shia theology. As a result, the Imam became very well-known to the Muslims to such an extent that, in the decades that followed, the next Shia Imams from his lineage were commonly called 'Ibn al-Reza' or 'the son of Reza'. Ma'mun realized that his plots against the Imam had failed, so he poisoned the Imam himself, martyring him after the Imam had been the Crown Prince for only about one-and-a-half years.

With Imam Reza's martyrdom, the second Islamic century had passed. Over time, the true Islam taught by the Prophet was misinterpreted by Muslims after his demise. Muslims had many battles and civil wars against each other, due to their political benefits and support for their own tribes. They split into many sects due to their differences in interpreting the true meaning of the Quran and the Prophet's teachings. The Shia Imams, however, were able to guide their followers continuously after the Prophet's demise. They provided their followers with correct interpretations of the Quran and the Prophet's teachings, and guided them on political views. As a result, by the beginning of the third Islamic century, Shi'ism was a strong and growing theology among the other sects of Muslims, with a strong scientific and cultural backbone. Its undeniable influence led Ma'mun to appoint Imam Reza as his crown prince.

The Imam's travel to Khorasan brought many blessings to the people of this land. With the Imam's guidance, many of the people in Khorasan became familiar with the Shia school of thought. Also, many of the Prophet's descendants, including the Imam's siblings and relatives, travelled to present-day Iran, and Iranians became more familiar with Shia theology. After the Imam's martyrdom, the village of Sanabad gradually expanded and turned into a city named 'Mashhad', which means 'the place of martyrdom'. Currently, Mashhad is the second largest city in Iran after the capital city of Tehran. Imam Reza's holy shrine is the largest shrine in the Islamic world. Millions of Muslims travel to Mashhad annually to visit the holy shrine of Imam Reza. For those Shias who visit his shrine, Imam Reza holds a special place in their

## 8- Imam Reza (AS): The Imam of Contentment

hearts. Despite the branches within the Shia, today any Shia who believes in the Imamate of Imam Reza is regarded as the follower of the 12 Shia Imams.



**IMAM REZA (AS):**  
**Aside from performing obligatory prayers,**  
**nothing is more valuable to God than**  
**making a believer happy.**