

The sources of the Imam's knowledge

The exceedingly precise and profound knowledge possessed by the Imams is derived from their communication with the world of the unseen and from inspiration (ilham).

The Noble Qur'an was also a rich source on which the Immaculate Imams drew for their knowledge. Given the breadth of their religious vision and perception, they were able to derive various ordinances from revelation and to extract all manner of truths from its innermost layers of meaning.

The third source on which they drew consisted of the books and pages which they inherited from the Most Noble Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, these permitted them to advance still further their level of knowledge and to broaden its scope.

There are numerous traditions relating to these three sources, some of which we will now cite.

Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, peace be upon him, said:

The Prophet Dawud inherited the knowledge of the preceding prophets, and he then bequeathed it to Sulayman. From Sulayman it was transmitted to the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, and we in turn have inherited it from him.

Imam Ali b. Musa al-Rida, peace be upon him, said:

When someone is chosen by God to administer the affairs of men, God expands his breast for him, places the well springs of wisdom in his heart, and inspires him with knowledge, so that he will be able to solve any problem that arises. He will know well the straight path of the truth. Such a one is none other than the Inerrant Imam, who enjoys the aid and support of his Lord and who lies beyond the reach of all error and sin. (248)

The seventh Imam, Musa b. Ja'far, peace be upon him, said:

Our knowledge is of three kinds: relating to the past; relating to the future; and relating to newly emergent situations. Knowledge relating to the past is interpreted for us; knowledge relating to the future is written down for us; and knowledge relating to newly emergent situations is infused in our hearts and our ears. This last category is the most noble part of our knowledge. However, no prophet will come after the Most Noble Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him and his family (250)

God's effusions of grace thus continue throughout time by means of the Inerrant Imam, in such a way that the link between man and the Creator is not severed with the passing of the Prophet.

Insofar as correct action depends on knowledge, it is incumbent on all Muslims to seek the knowledge and guidance of Ali in order for their deeds to be in conformity with the teachings of the Prophet.

The Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, being fully aware of the future needs of the Muslims, decided to entrust his knowledge to one who would be able to satisfy the religious needs of society after his death, and present God's commands and ordinances in uncorrupted form to all those who had recently become Muslim. He was therefore commanded by God to exert himself in the training and education of Ali, that enlightened one whose being concealed precious treasure of learning, who had the necessary qualities for guarding and preserving God's laws, and who had all the attributes requisite in a leader.
