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*Selected Theological  
Writings*

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# I A Précis of the Doctrines of Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī

by  
**Ibn Fūrak**

## Introduction to the Text

Ibn Fūrak (d. 1015) is widely acknowledged as a pivotal figure in the development of the doctrines of the Sunnī Ash'arī school. Born in Isfahan, he studied with two prominent disciples of Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī and was active in the city of Nishapur in Iran as a teacher of theology, law, and hadith. The discussion below is a section from one of his few extant works, *A Précis of the Doctrines of Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī*. Ibn Fūrak provides a brief overview of traditional Sunnī views on the imamate. Like al-Ash'arī, he interprets the history of succession after the Prophet Muḥammad in a way that is charitable to the Companions and downplays the conflicts among them. Early Sunnī theologians conceived of the imamate in theological terms that strictly adhered to precedence, while later jurists understood the office in pragmatic and legal terms. Ibn Fūrak writes about the imamate in ways representative of early theologians.

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## Chapter 35: An Elucidation of His Beliefs Regarding the Imamate and Other, Subsidiary Issues

Know that Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī believed that the imamate exists only by virtue of the revealed law.<sup>1</sup> It is only through scriptural texts that we know of its necessity. Al-Ash'arī held the same opinion about prophets and messengers. Prophethood is the foundation of the imamate, yet even the necessity of prophethood, he argued, could not be established by reason. Reason may admit the possibility of prophets and messengers, but it does not establish their logical necessity. The Almighty commands His servants to worship Him in various ways that He sees fit. They are His creation and property and under His power and dominion. It is the right of God to refrain from demanding such worship or to require it through the teachings of a prophet. Prophets exist as a result of divine wisdom, but if God had refrained from ever sending us prophets or legislating worship, this would be neither unwise, unjust, nor unlawful for the Almighty. Al-Ash'arī never claimed to know the reason why God commanded such worship. He did not claim [as the Mu'tazilīs did] that God desired to benefit mankind or to command that which was necessarily in mankind's interests.

It was his belief that the famous axiom “Never did an age pass without a prophet” was only an oral tradition. The axiom was not established through reason. Were God to leave a community without prophets, the actions of its people would not be subject to ethical or legal determinations or classifications. One could not call their deeds morally upright or repugnant, obedient or disobedient, legally compulsory or supererogatory. The rewards and punishments that usually follow such deeds would not apply to these people either. Accountability for actions is fully dependent on a person's hearing or learning about scriptural texts [*al-sam'*].<sup>2</sup> The moral expectations for and legal responsibilities of an adult in such a community [without a prophet] would parallel the expectations for children in our own community. Thus, since al-Ash'arī believed that the foundation [i.e., prophethood] was dispensable, surely its derivative [the imamate] was as well.

<sup>1</sup> For the Arabic source text, see Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad maqālāt*, 180–190.

<sup>2</sup> *Al-sam'* refers to revealed knowledge that was transmitted from a representative of God, such as a prophet, rather than reason. The term encompassed both the Quran and prophetic traditions.

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In his opinion, consensus establishes the necessity of the imamate. He believed that revelation also supported his opinion regarding the prima facie non-liability of humans. Reason could not establish the legal necessity of any action or the liability of any adult who failed to perform it. In this regard, the Almighty says, “We would never chastise [any community for the wrong they may do] before We sent an apostle [to them]” [Q. 17:15].

According to al-Ash‘arī, the obligation to consider miracles carefully is tied to the necessity of obeying the authority of prophets. The latter entails abiding by their judgments, commands, and prohibitions. It also includes affirming their promises of reward and punishment in the hereafter. If prophets are truthful in what they claim, then it is incumbent on all others to adhere to their teachings and commands. This obligation is not restricted to those who believe in a given prophet; it includes everyone. It is immaterial whether a person knows of this necessity, affirms the authority of a prophet, or considers the prophet’s claims reliable. This is because [divinely imposed] obligations may be fixed even when their intended recipients are unaware of them.

Al-Ash‘arī would argue that imams serve as successors to prophets and stand in their place in the following capacities:

- (1) discharging the duties of the law;
- (2) administering nondiscretionary penalties [*ḥudūd*];<sup>3</sup>
- (3) levying taxes;
- (4) safeguarding Islam’s centers and territories;<sup>4</sup>
- (5) giving aid to the oppressed;
- (6) preventing oppressors from engaging in unlawful activity.

The imam does all of this without promulgating new laws or altering the revealed law. Rather, he fulfills these responsibilities as the tradition dictates and as an equal member of the community; nothing more. He

<sup>3</sup> The term *ḥudūd* (sing. *ḥadd*) refers to fixed, nondiscretionary penalties for specific offenses described in the Quran and hadith such as theft, illicit sexual relations, false accusations of illicit sexual relations, and banditry.

<sup>4</sup> The author refers to *al-bayḍa* or that which others described as *bayḍat al-islām* (“Islam’s heartlands”). Like *dār al-islām* (“the abode of Islam”), the term referred to those territories under the jurisdiction of the head of the Muslim community who guaranteed the security of inhabitants and their right to practice Islam in accordance with the revealed law. While “the abode” theoretically included borders that periodically shifted as a consequence of war, classical jurists may have reserved *bayḍat al-islām* for Mecca, Medina, and other cities that became major Muslim centers.

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protects people's rights according to the dictates of scripture, prophetic practice, the community's consensus, analogical reasoning, and any principles derived from these sources. The imam resembles Mu'adh [b. Jabal], whom the Prophet sent to Yemen as his emissary:

"How shall you adjudicate?" asked the Prophet.

"By the Book of God," answered Mu'adh.

"If you are unable to find a precedent?"

"Then by the practice of the Prophet."

"And if you are unable to find a precedent there?"

"Then I will strive to find a solution to the best of my ability."

The Prophet prayed [in approval], "Praise the Lord who made the emissary of His emissary suited for this mission."

According to al-Ash'arī, infallibility is a requisite of prophethood but not of the imamate. Prophets must be infallible because they are obliged to communicate with the unseen world and relay information from it, promulgate revealed law, provide answers that are impossible for others to know, and perform deeds that are impossible for others to carry out in his stead. Imams cannot be described as having these same duties.

Others in the community possess the same information as the imam regarding the laws that he puts into practice. We know this because he relies on the same set of sources as they do in searching for solutions. Thus, it suffices when the imam appears to be a person of just character. Nothing beyond this can be required of him for discharging his duties, as long as he is able to do so appropriately with justice and autonomy. Although one cannot ascertain the inner state of the imam or his secrets, certainty about his public deeds is enough. As long as he governs by the revealed law, observing its duties as prescribed by verses of scripture, well-known authorities in the community, and the tradition in general, his imamate remains legitimate. However, any deviation from this path causes the loss of his legitimacy and the need for a new imam. The community is responsible for assessing the conduct of its imams. The imam can only be held to the same standards as those that exist for other officeholders. His situation mirrors that of the deputies, judges, tax collectors, and other employees who assist him in governing. All of them are equally responsible for observing and enforcing the law.

According to al-Ash'arī, the candidate should be a distinguished scholar and someone noted for his intelligence and discernment. The candidate should also be revered for his religiosity and ranked among the

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most pious members of the community. Finally, he should demonstrate political acumen, autonomy, and precision in his decisions and actions. Al-Ash‘arī believed that a candidate’s imamate could receive confirmation only if he was the most learned scholar of his age or considered the foremost in courage, righteousness, and political acumen. The imamate of a candidate of less merit could not be ratified in the presence of such a [superior] person. Al-Ash‘arī differed with several other scholars in our school, who allowed the imamate of individuals of lower caliber to be confirmed in such cases. Al-Ash‘arī argued that each person who governed after the Prophet obtained the imamate only once he had become the most qualified and distinguished member of the community. The imams are to be ranked in merit in the order of their succession.

According to al-Ash‘arī, the prophetic hadiths indicate that the imamate is restricted to a select group of people and a select group of Arabs to the exclusion of others. We are referring to the tribe of Quraysh. This is so because of the statement of the Prophet, “The imams will come from Quraysh,” with some recensions containing the addition “as long as they exist.” Reason does not justify any such tribal restriction. In his *Epistle [Risāla]*,<sup>5</sup> al-Ash‘arī argues that rational evidence cannot establish the imamate as necessary in one era but not in others, nor can it justify the imamate’s restriction to one house to the exclusion of others. Scholars can reach these conclusions only by adhering to scriptural texts.

According to al-Ash‘arī, a prophet becomes an emissary [*mursal*] of God only when the Lord selects him for this task. One knows his mission to be genuine by the miracles that he performs. One can deduce the truth of those miracles by carefully considering the evidence. As for an imam, his imamate is ratified when those qualified to select such leaders confirm his authority with a contractual agreement. According to al-Ash‘arī, a prophet may confirm the imamate of a person by designating him directly and identifying him by name, lineage, and so on. The Prophet did this in his lifetime with his governors and tax collectors. The Prophet could also confirm someone’s imamate by discussing his qualities in general terms and charging the community with the duty of selecting the right candidate. The members of the community would be obligated to deduce the most appropriate person for the task through a methodical process of reasoning. Only by engaging in such a process can the community

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Fūrak does not specify which *risāla* he has in mind.

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identify the person whom the Prophet desired and described as possessing certain qualities.

The proper method for selecting candidates and investing them with authority can be ascertained in the same way that answers to legal queries are ascertained: by referring to scriptural proof texts and the independent reasoning [*ijtihād*] of expert jurists. In legal cases, one must rely on such reasoning in the absence of any clear precedent or proof text. Independent reasoning involves utilizing a foundational principle of the revealed legal tradition and deriving a ruling appropriate to the circumstances at hand.

According to al-Ash‘arī, the duty of appointing an imam necessitates the independent reasoning of experts and resembles the collective obligation to understand Islamic jurisprudence or to bathe, bury, and hold funeral services for the dead. As long as some members of the community fulfill these duties, all others are freed from any further obligation. The responsibility of appointing a new imam upon the death of a previous one, or in other circumstances, falls into the same category. In these cases, a final decision requires experts capable of such reasoning. Al-Ash‘arī would argue that such experts are necessary since they, too, are eligible to serve as imams in the candidate’s place. When members of the electorate possess these qualities, their decision is lawful and legitimate. As a result, the imamate of their appointee is likewise legitimate.

According to al-Ash‘arī, the number of individuals who participate in the electoral process is immaterial. There is neither a quorum nor a limit to the number of participants. When multiple people engage in the electoral process, all participants must possess the necessary qualifications. This is the only requirement. However, al-Ash‘arī also believed that one elector could suffice. He appealed to the precedent of Abū Bakr, who appointed ‘Umar and subsequently received collective approval for his decision. No one in the community criticized Abū Bakr or objected to his decision to select a successor and to formalize his appointment autonomously [without consulting the electorate].<sup>6</sup>

When someone charged with selecting the next caliph appoints a qualified candidate to the position, the latter’s imamate is confirmed, and everyone must yield to his authority and obey his commands. The

<sup>6</sup> It appears that Abū Bakr discussed his decision with other Companions only after he proclaimed ‘Umar his successor. In contradiction to what Ibn Fūrak claims here, there is evidence that Talḥa objected to Abū Bakr’s decision. See Madelung, *Succession*, 55. Ibn Fūrak acknowledges elsewhere that there were indeed some initial objections to Abū Bakr’s decision.

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community must urge anyone who subsequently contests the authority of the new imam to repent. This includes anyone who accuses the new imam of some deficiency that would disqualify him from authority. If a dissenter refuses to repent and to cease his accusations, he should be prohibited and prevented from continuing.

One must consider carefully cases in which two factions confirm the authority of different candidates independently of one another. In such scenarios, the authority of the superior candidate must be universally confirmed. The other candidate would have to be described as less meritorious or deficient in one of the requisites of the imamate. What happens when neither candidate can be described as inferior to the other in merit, rank, or suitability for office? One must ascertain the date on which each candidate obtained his authority. The candidate whose authority was ratified first would then be universally confirmed. If the candidates received their authority simultaneously, or if one cannot determine the earlier date, the constituents must offer a new contract for the position to the candidate who will best serve the community. After this contract is ratified, the members of the community should defend their choice against anyone who contests it. The community should engage the contender in armed conflict until he is killed.

Al-Ash‘arī opined that the procedures outlined above, including the various requisites for a legitimate imam, all come from scriptural texts. Therefore, the imamate of an unqualified candidate cannot be ratified even if some members of the community offer him a contract for the position. Likewise, if an army defeats its opponents and pledges allegiance to someone who does not possess the necessary qualities to be an imam, this person’s imamate cannot be confirmed. A [true] imam cannot obtain authority through coercion or military might. Nonetheless, it is unlawful to rebel against such a tyrant. The faithful should secretly condemn the tyrant in their hearts while manifesting obedience in public. Any other course of action could potentially lead to civil unrest, tremendous turmoil, widespread corruption, and an outbreak of violence. Furthermore, averting tyranny through activism or military action is the responsibility of a righteous imam, who should be ready to lead in this capacity. The faithful should follow this righteous imam’s judgment and any course of action that he commands. According to al-Ash‘arī, the faithful may command what is right and forbid what is wrong only within these bounds.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For the most comprehensive study on the commandment to pursue all that is right (*ma‘rūf*) and to prohibit all that is wrong (*munkar*), see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).



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He differed from the Khārijīs and the Mu‘tazilīs, who argued that it is obligatory for every person with the capacity to rebel against a tyrant to take up arms and do so.

There can be only one imam [at a time]. Al-Ash‘arī argued that the Prophet’s Companions and the consensus of the Muslim community support this principle. Were this not the case and a multiplicity of imams were possible, what would prevent their number from increasing *ad infinitum*? Everyone would desire to manage their own affairs and those of their household. Such an outcome would invalidate the very essence of the imamate. We have relied on scriptural texts to deduce this opinion. One cannot, however, refute the argument that a number of prophets and messengers may appear in the same period. Indeed, we have found examples in history of prophets and messengers appearing together.

According to al-Ash‘arī, the imamate is restricted to candidates from the tribe of Quraysh who possess the necessary qualifications for the office. It makes no difference if he is the closest person to the Prophet or the furthest from him in kinship ties, so long as the candidate is Qurashī. Al-Ash‘arī argued that the office of the imam is not inherited. Only qualified candidates can accede to the office, and it is the community that selects such people when needed. Despite the abovementioned requirement [of lineage], it is wrong to restrict the office further to one particular branch of Quraysh.<sup>8</sup>

According to al-Ash‘arī, it is incumbent on every Muslim to know the identity of the imam of the community. This is so because it is every Muslim’s legal duty to obey the imam. Thus, when someone is legitimately invested with the authority of an imam, every legally responsible believer [*mukallaf*] must know this person, follow him, and believe in the legitimacy of his imamate.

Al-Ash‘arī believed that an imam has every right to appoint a successor and to invest him with authority by concluding a contract for the position

<sup>8</sup> Ibn Fūrak may have had the Abbasids in mind when rejecting the claim that the office was inherited. A faction of the Abbasids claimed that the Prophet’s uncle al-‘Abbās was his closest legal heir and had the best claim to the caliphate. Despite rejecting such claims as erroneous, Sunnis broadly accepted the Abbasids as legitimate, since they implemented Islamic laws, did not prohibit members of the community from freely practicing their religion, and also happened to possess Qurashī ancestry. Although Zaydis and Twelvers restricted the imamate to ‘Alī and the Prophet’s progeny and described the office as a legacy left behind by prophets, they did not argue that it was subject to inheritance. Zaydis argued that ‘Alid imams distinguished themselves by inaugurating a revolutionary mission, while Imāmīs held that God or the Prophet appointed imams to their stations.

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with him. When an imam does this, the community is bound by that contract. The constituents must obey the successor selected by the imam, and they have no right to consultation in the selection process. To justify this point, al-Ash‘arī appealed to the succession of ‘Umar and the precedent of Abū Bakr, in particular. He argued that the Companions collectively approved of Abū Bakr’s choice. Although a number of them initially voiced some objections, they, too, eventually endorsed the decision.

According to al-Ash‘arī, dissimulation [*taqiyya*] is lawful for an imam when he does not have the numbers or means to repel his adversaries and they triumph over him. Even in such cases, an imam retains his authority. Dissimulation does not terminate his imamate.

In regard to [debates about] the most virtuous Companion of the Prophet, al-Ash‘arī believed that Abū Bakr possessed the most merit. After the Prophet, no one in the community was superior to Abū Bakr, and he was the rightful imam. As Muḥammad’s direct successor, only Abū Bakr can truly be called “the Successor of the Messenger of God” [*khalīfat rasūl Allāh*]. He is also widely known by his epithet “he who affirms the truth” [*al-Ṣiddīq*]. Al-Ash‘arī appealed to two proofs to confirm the legitimacy of Abū Bakr’s succession. First, he argued that the Prophet signaled his approval of Abū Bakr’s imamate. Second, the individuals who were charged with selecting the next leader ratified his imamate with a contract.

Al-Ash‘arī rejected the claim that the Prophet had officially appointed Abū Bakr as his successor. Had Abū Bakr received such a designation [*naṣṣ*], it would have been unlawful for him to offer the office to anyone else. Yet he [initially] did just that: he asked ‘Umar and Abū ‘Ubayda [al-Jarrāh] to extend their hands, so that he could pledge his allegiance to one of them.

According to al-Ash‘arī, no Companion surpassed Abū Bakr in knowledge, courage, or asceticism. He was the best of them in independently governing the affairs of the community and the most prudent. He was a paragon of justice every day of his life. He was steadfast in his adherence to justice and never deviated from it. One cannot cite a single instance in which he contradicted scripture or the prophetic example. All of his actions represented truth and justice, from the beginning until the very end. This includes his decision to bar Fāṭima [the Prophet’s daughter] from the lands of Fadak,<sup>9</sup> in particular, and from the inheritance of the Prophet, in general. Indeed, the hadith that Abū Bakr narrated and implemented

<sup>9</sup> On Fadak, see *EF*, s.v. “Fadak” (L. Veccia Vaglieri).