

The Rightly Guided Caliphs: Ali ibn Abi Talib



Ali ibn Abi Talib is the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam, the fourth of the *Rashidun*. He ruled the Muslim *Ummah*, after Abu Bakr, Umar ibn Al-Khattab and Uthman, from 656 to 661 CE. Ali spent his childhood emulating the noble character of his beloved cousin Muhammad, and his youth learning the details of Islam. Ali grew into a noble warrior with a humble heart and he is remembered for his courage, honesty, generosity, kindness and devotion

to Islam.

Ali was the son Abu Talib, Prophet Muhammad's uncle and guardian. When Ali was small a great famine ravaged Mecca and its surrounds and Abu Talib was unable to feed and clothe his family. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, and his wife Khadijah offered to take in Ali and care for him. As a direct consequence of this Ali and Muhammad became very close and Ali tried his best to emulate his cousin's behaviour and noble character. Ali was around 10 years old when Prophet Muhammad received the first revelations. He was also present in the home when Muhammad revealed to his family that he had been called upon to be the Messenger of Allah. Thus Ali accepted the truth of Islam at a very early age and his dedication and support of his uncle was unquestionable.

The history of Islam is strewn with examples of Ali's commitment to the cause of Islam and to Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him. When Prophet Muhammad called a meeting of his tribesman to explain the new faith and his position in it he asked pointedly who would support him. When all those present grew quiet, Ali, even though he was a young boy, stood up and pledged his support. When the Meccan leaders were planning to assassinate Prophet Muhammad, the Muslims decided to leave and make *hijrah* to Yathrib (soon to be renamed Medina). Muhammad, Abu Bakr and Ali were the only ones who were left behind. While Prophet Muhammad and Abu Bakr walked into the desert night Ali slept in the Prophet's bed waiting to confront the assassins. Ali survived the night, and in the coming days, he returned the valuables that had been left in trust with Prophet Muhammad, to their rightful owners. Soon after completing his mission Ali joined the Muslims in Yathrib.

Like Uthman, Ali was also the son-in-law of the Prophet. He married Fatimah, Prophet Muhammad's youngest daughter. Ali and Fatimah lived very humble austere lives but sometimes life was just too difficult. Many times they were hungry and overworked but even then their generosity continued. There were times when they gave away the last of their food in order to help someone even poorer than themselves. At one time when the young couple approached Prophet Muhammad asking for a servant he rebuked for asking for luxuries when poor people filled the mosque. The same evening Prophet Muhammad visited Ali and Fatimah in their home and taught them words of the remembrance of Allah. He assured them that remembering Allah would be

more beneficial than a servant to ease their workload. Ali never forgot the words of advice given to him that night, and said that not a night passed that he did not recite those words before sleeping. Ali and Fatimah's marriage lasted ten years until Fatimah's death. During that time they had four children and their sons Hasan and Husayn were particularly close to Prophet Muhammad. Although polygamy was permitted, Ali did not marry another woman while Fatimah was alive, and their marriage is looked upon as something special. They were both well loved by Prophet Muhammad and by each other. After Fatimah's death, Ali married other wives and fathered many children.

Ali has been described as one of the most virtuous of Prophet Muhammad's companions and he was known to be one of the staunchest supporters of Islam. Ali became a strong warrior and distinguished himself in the crucial first battle against the Meccans, known as the Battle of Badr. Prophet Muhammad bestowed upon Ali the nickname 'Lion of Allah'. It is reported in the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad that during the battle of Khaybar, the Prophet bestowed a great honour on his young cousin. The night before the battle Prophet Muhammad informed his companions that the flag would be given to 'a man who loves Allah and His Messenger and is also loved by Allah and His Messenger, he does not flee the battlefield, and Allah will bring about victory through him'. The companions spent the night wondering who the flag would be handed to. Every companion hoped for this honour, but this particular time the honour belonged to Ali.

After Prophet Muhammad died and Abu Bakr was elected *khalifah*, Ali retired from public life and dedicated himself to studying and teaching the Quran. He was consulted on matters of state by both Abu Bakr and Umar ibn Al-Khattab and gave one of his daughters, Umm Kulthum, to Umar in marriage. When Uthman ibn Affan was murdered in the service of the Muslim *Ummah*, Ali was chosen as the fourth of those men known as the Rightly Guided Caliphs of Islam.



Ali ibn Abi Talib was the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam. The cousin and son-in-law of Prophet. After the assassination of Uthman ibn Affan many Muslims were eager for Ali to take on the leadership but Ali was concerned that the seeds of rebelliousness were being sewn among the believers. He hesitated until some of those who had been closest to Prophet Muhammad encouraged him and gave him their support. The events surrounding Uthman's murder

catapulted the fledgling *Ummah* into a period that became known as the "time of tribulation". Sadly, Ali began and ended his caliphate in treacherous times.

Ali accepted the caliphate very reluctantly and moved the capital of the fledgling Muslim *Ummah* from Medina to Kufa in present day Iraq. He felt that the civil strife surrounding the assassination of Uthman was due in part to the ineptitude of the governors thus he recalled all the governors appointed by Uthman and appointed new ones, whom Ali felt would administrate their provinces better. Muawiyah, Uthman's nephew and governor of the Greater Syria Area, refused to step down until Uthman's murderers were brought to justice.

One of Prophet Muhammad's widows Aisha, also believed that Uthman's murderers should be brought to trial. However, because of the chaos during the last days of Uthman's rule it was difficult to complete this task as it may have brought about more strife.

Despite his best efforts to bring an end to the strife that had beset the *Ummah*, Ali was unable to unify all the bickering and warring factions and in 657 CE Muawiyah's refusal to step down from the governorship of Syria resulted in military action. Muawiyah's and Ali's forces met at the Battle of Siffin. This was actually a series of skirmishes and negotiations that took place between May and July 657 CE and ended finally in the arbitration of Adhurh.

At first Ali and his forces appeared to be winning but then both sides resolved to stop the bloodshed and appoint a judge to decide which party was upon the truth. A small number of men, who became known as the Kharwarij, refused this arbitration, and then waged war against Ali, may Allah be pleased with him. Ali would spend the next two years in a campaign against the Kharwarij until he was assassinated by one of them. After his assassination, his son Al-Hasan, may Allah be pleased with him, became the rightful Caliph over the *Ummah*. In this regard, the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, said: "Indeed this son of mine (i.e. Al-Hasan) is a graceful individual; it is through him that Allah shall unite two large parties of the *Ummah*." True to this narration, when Al-Hasan witnessed the strife and bickering he called Muawiyah to arbitration and willingly stepped down for him, thus uniting the Muslim *Ummah*. This event took place in the year 41 Hijri, which is known as the 'year of congregation'.

Throughout his trials and tribulations Ali remained noble, courageous, and generous. Even in those perilous times, he forgave his enemies and strove continuously for a united *Ummah*.

The Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, stated: "Caliphate after me shall last for 30 years." Indeed, the period of Abu Bakr's caliphate, along with that of Umar, Uthman, Ali and Al-Hasan, adds up to be exactly 30 years.

Take the Quiz

1) How long did Ali ibn Abi Talib's marriage to the Prophet's daughter Fatimah last?

- A. Ten years.
- B. Twenty years.
- C. Thirty years.
- D. Fifty years.

2) How was Ali ibn Abi Talib's father related to the Prophet?

- A. He was the Prophet's uncle and guardian.
- B. He was the Prophet's first cousin.
- C. He was the Prophet's father-in-law.
- D. None of the above.

3) How many children did Ali ibn Abi Talib father with the Prophet's daughter Fatimah?

- A. Two.
- B. Four.
- C. Eight.
- D. Ten.

4) What important role did Ali ibn Abi Talib contribute towards the *hijrah* of the Prophet Muhammad to Yathrib?

- A. He remained behind to confront the Prophet's assassins.
- B. He accompanied the Prophet on his perilous journey.
- C. He returned all the valuables entrusted to the Prophet to the rightful owners.
- D. Option A and C.

5) Ali ibn Abi Talib ranks as the:

- A. third Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam.
- B. fourth Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam.
- C. fifth Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam.
- D. sixth Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam.

6) How old was Ali ibn Abi Talib when the Prophet received the first revelations?

- A. Around ten years old.
- B. Around twenty years old.
- C. Thirty six years old.
- D. Forty five years old.

7) How was Ali ibn Abi Talib related to Prophet Muhammad?

- A. He was the Prophet's son.
- B. He was the Prophet's cousin.
- C. He was the Prophet's uncle.
- D. He was the Prophet's younger brother.

8) As the newly appointed caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib moved the capital of the fledgling Muslim *Ummah* from Medina to:

- A. Makkah.
- B. Tabuk.
- C. Kufa.
- D. Abha.

9) Select a true statement with regards to the caliphate of Ali ibn Abi Talib.

- A. *With the exception of a few close companions of the Prophet, hardly any Muslim was eager for him to take on the leadership.*
- B. *He took on the role of caliph after the assassination of Umar ibn Al-Khattab.*
- C. *He was very eager to take on the role of caliph after the assassination of the previous caliph.*
- D. *He became the caliph after the assassination of Uthman ibn Affan.*

10) Despite his hesitation and reluctance, what factor encouraged Ali ibn Abi Talib to take on role of Caliph?

- A. *The encouragement and support of some of those who had been closest to the Prophet.*
- B. *His ardent desire to rule over the Muslim Ummah.*
- C. *His hopes for financial stability, and a grander and luxurious life as Caliph.*
- D. *His desire for fame and recognition throughout the Muslim world.*

11) Which of the following best describes the nature of the period of the Muslim *Ummah*, when Ali ibn Abi Talib took on the caliphate?

- A. *A time of tribulation.*
- B. *A time of prosperity.*
- C. *A time of obscenity and vulgarity.*
- D. *None of the above.*

12) At the 'Battle of Siffin' which two forces met with one another?

- A. *The forces of Ali ibn Abi Talib and the Roman Empire.*
- B. *The forces of Ali ibn Abi Talib and the wife of Prophet Muhammad, Khadijah.*
- C. *The forces of Ali ibn Abi Talib and Muawiyah.*
- D. *None of the above.*

13) The assassination of Ali ibn Abi Talib took place at the hands of:

- A. *Muawiyah.*
- B. *one of the Kharwarij.*
- C. *the governors who he had recalled from their appointed posts.*
- D. *None of the above.*