

Ali, son of Abu Talib

(part 1 of 2): The Early Years



Ali “Ibn” (son of) Abu Talib was the young cousin of Prophet Muhammad. This child, who greatly admired his older cousin, grew into a noble warrior for Islam, a knowledgeable judge, a remarkable exegete of Quran and a righteous leader of the Muslim nation.

Ali was born in Mecca around the year 600 CE. His father was Abu Talib, Prophet Muhammad’s uncle and staunch supporter. When Ali was a young child, a great famine ravaged the area around Mecca, food was scarce, and many families were unable to feed and clothe their children. Muhammad, who was not yet a prophet, offered to nurture and care for his young cousin. Consequently, Ali was raised by Muhammad and his first wife Khadijah. Ali adored his older cousin and followed him around copying Muhammad’s actions. As he grew older, Ali also began to emulate Muhammad’s noble ways.^[1]

When Ali was around 10 years of age, Muhammad received the first revelations of the Holy Quran from God Almighty. Ali was there with his cousin when Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, revealed to his family that he had been called to be the Messenger of God. It is said that Ali witnessed Muhammad and Khadijah praying to God and that he asked about what he had seen. As soon as Prophet Muhammad explained the message of Islam to his young cousin, Ali accepted it as the truth. However, before he embraced Islam he thought deeply about what his father’s reaction would be. The next morning Ali testified that there was no god worthy of worship but Allah and that Muhammad was His messenger. Ali has the honour of being the first child to accept Islam.

Some scholars of Islam believe that Ali may have been older than 10 years when he accepted Islam, therefore you may read in various texts that Ali was the first youth to embrace Islam. Nevertheless, Ali’s age is not of primary importance, what counts the most is that he was a bright and clever young man, eager to learn and eager to worship God in the correct manner. Many scholars

point out that Ali was one of many young men and women around the Prophet Muhammad who had never been initiated into the idolatrous rituals of the pre Islamic Arabs. Ali never prostrated before anything or anyone but God.

Ali spent his childhood with Fatima, the youngest daughter of Mohammad and Khadijah. Some years later when the Muslim community had migrated from Mecca to the city of Medina Ali went to Prophet Muhammad and proposed marriage to Fatima.

Ali however was upset by the fact that he was very poor and had nothing of value to present to Fatima as a bridal gift. Prophet Muhammad reminded him that he had a shield, to sell. Ali sold the shield to Uthman ibn Affan and was about to run excitedly back to the Prophet when Uthman stopped him and returned his shield, offering it as a marriage gift to Ali and Fatima. It is believed that Fatima and Ali were in their middle to late teens when Prophet Muhammad himself performed their marriage ceremony.

The young boy who had followed his older cousin around like a shadow had grown into a noble young warrior. When God revealed the verse, “**and warn your tribe. O Muhammad.**” (Quran 26:214) Prophet Muhammad invited all his relatives for a meal; after they had eaten he addressed them and asked who from his family would join him in God’s cause? None had the courage to answer but a boy in his early teens. Ali was that boy and he stood tall in the face of laughter and derision and expressed his desire to help Prophet Muhammad in whatever way he could be of service. In the difficult times that lay ahead, Ali stood firm, and repeatedly demonstrated his courage and love for God and His Messenger.

When the disbelievers of Mecca planned to kill Prophet Muhammad, it became necessary for him and Abu Bakr to leave Mecca under the cover of darkness. As they walked into the desert night it was the teenager Ali who slept in Muhammad’s bed, knowing that at any minute there could be assassins attempting to murder him. 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. Prophet Muhammad considered his young cousin to be amongst the bravest, trustworthy and pious of his companions. Soon afterwards, Ali joined his beloved cousin in Medina.

Prophet Muhammad so cherished his young cousin he called him by many fond and endearing names. The name that Ali treasured most was Abu Turab (Father of Dust). Once when Ali was sleeping in the mosque courtyard, his back became covered with dust. Prophet Muhammad approached him, pulled him to his feet, and wiped the dust of his back, laughingly calling him Abu Turab. Prophet Muhammad also called Ali Haidarah (the lion). Prophet Muhammad’s young shadow grew into a respected warrior for Islam.

Footnotes:

[1] Based on the work of Ibn Kathir, Biographies of the Rightly Guided Caliphs.

(part 2 of 2): From Warrior to Caliph

Ali was the fourth rightly guided Caliph.[1] He followed in the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad, Abu Bakr, Omar, and Uthman, and ruled the Muslim Empire, according to the divinely revealed law of God, from approximately 656 to 661 CE. Ali was the young cousin and son in law of Prophet Muhammad. He spent his childhood emulating the noble character of his beloved cousin, and his youth learning the details of Islam. Ali grew into a noble warrior; physically strong and assertive but with a humble heart, filled with love for God and His messenger Muhammad. Muslims remember Ali for his courage, his honesty, his generous and kind behaviour towards others, and his unswerving devotion to Islam.

After the migration to Medina, Ali married his childhood companion Fatima, daughter of Prophet Muhammad. The young couple led a simple and austere life, for Ali did not care for material wealth, rather he was focused on pleasing God and attaining everlasting life in the hereafter. They had no servants or slaves. Ali drew and carried water and Fatima would grind the corn until her hands were rough and sore. Once when the young couple approached Prophet Muhammad asking for a servant he rebuked them by saying that he could not give them such luxuries when hungry poor people filled the mosque. Ali and Fatima returned home feeling quite dejected.

That evening Prophet Muhammad visited Ali and Fatima in their home. He sat on the edge of their bed and taught them words of remembrance with which to praise God. He assured them that remembering God would be more beneficial for them than a servant or slave to ease their workload. Ali never forgot the words of advice given to him that night, later in his life he said that not a night passed that he did not recite those words before sleeping. Ali and his family went to great lengths to please God, often they would go hungry themselves giving away all their food to people poorer than themselves. Ali's generosity knew no bounds, he treated everyone, friend or foe, with respect and kindness.

Imam (Scholar) Ahmad described Ali as one of the most virtuous of Prophet Muhammad's companions and Ali was known to be amongst the Prophet's most staunch supporters. Ali deservedly became known as a strong warrior and he distinguished himself in the crucial first battle against the unbelieving men of Mecca, known as the Battle of Badr. The young lion of God participated in all the battles fought in the early days of Islam except on one occasion. It is reported in the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad that during the battle of Khaybar Prophet Muhammad bestowed a great honour on his young cousin.

Prophet Muhammad informed his companions **“tomorrow I shall give the standard (flag) to a man who loves God and His Messenger and is also**

loved by God and His Messenger, he does not flee the battlefield, and God will bring about victory through him”. The companions of Prophet Muhammad spent the night wondering who the flag would be handed too. Omar Ibn Al Khattab is believed to have said that it was the only time he longed for leadership, but this particular honour belonged to Ali.

After Uthman Ibn Affan was murdered in the service of the Muslim nation, Ali was chosen as the fourth of those known as the rightly guided Caliphs. Many Muslims were eager for Ali to take on leadership but Ali was concerned that already the seeds of rebelliousness were being sewn among the believers. He hesitated until some of the companions who had been closest to Prophet Muhammad urged him on and gave him their support. The events surrounding Uthman’s murder had flung the young Muslim nation into a period that became known as the “time of tribulation”. Ali began and ended his Caliphate in times of trial and tribulation however; he remained true to his convictions and ruled in a manner that befitted the child who learned his morals and values at the feet of the Prophet Muhammad.

Ali was a profoundly religious man; he was devoted to Islam and strove in his daily life and his position as leader to uphold the Quran and the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad. War broke out amongst the Muslims and Ali found himself attempting to lead a nation beset with rebellion and in fighting. Throughout this time of civil strife and war, Ali was ever mindful of the great task that lay before him. He was responsible for the people of the Muslim nation.

At this point it must be clearly noted that Ali and Uthman were brothers in Islam, both devoted to God, His messenger Muhammad and the religion of Islam. Both ruled the Muslim nation with humble hearts, austerity, and piety. However, their world was changing in dramatic ways and some of their actions were difficult to understand then and now. However, in retrospect it is clear that their love for Islam and desire for the hereafter for all the believers was never in question. Ali remained noble, courageous, and generous. Even in perilous times, he forgave his enemies and wanted only unity for the Muslim nation.

Ali was murdered with a poisoned arrow. The assassin, who struck while Ali was praying in the mosque, brought to an end the life of the lion of God and the era of the four rightly Guided Caliphs. Abu Bakr, Omar Ibn al Khattab, Uthman Ibn Affan, and Ali Ibn Abu Talib were men of noble stature and high moral fibre, they ruled with the Quran and the lessons taught to them by Prophet Muhammad. Sadly, the world is unlikely to see men such as these again before the end of days.

Footnotes:

[1] Caliph –leader of the Muslim nation.

