



Description of who is the Most Eligible for Leading Prayer ¹

Imām `Alā`uddīn Abū Bakr al-Kasānī

Translated by Sidi Abu Hasan

Released by www.marifah.net 1428 H

The free man is more eligible to lead the prayer (*awlā bil imāmah*) than the slave;
the pious man (*taqī*) is more eligible than the impious (*fāsiq*);
the person who can see is more eligible than the blind;
the person with legitimate parentage is more eligible than the illegitimate child;
an urbanite is more eligible than a yokel (*a`arābī*);

But the person who is most qualified amongst all mentioned, is the person who is the most knowledgeable about the Sunnah;
and [then] the most godwary, scrupulously pious (*war`a*);
and [then] the person who recites the Qur`ān best (*aqra`ubum*)
and [then] the eldest amongst them.

Undoubtedly, if all of these qualities can be found in one person, then he is the most qualified person to lead the prayer as we have explained that *imāmah* or leadership in prayer is based upon superiority, and fullness of virtue (*fadīla, kamāl*); thus, whosoever combines these qualities is most meritorious among the people (*akmal al-nās*).

[Reasons for the above:]

As for knowledge, piety, and reciting the Qur`ān – it is obvious; there is no need for further elaboration.

As for age: the older being more eligible – it is because whosoever has lived longer in Islām, then his obedience and steadfastness in Islām is more [hence the precedence].

Further, the person who is most knowledgeable about the Sunnah is more eligible when he can recite the Qur`ān properly [with minimum *tajwīd*] such that his prayer is valid. He ² has mentioned this in the chapter of Prayer (*kitāb al-ṣalāh*) and he gave precedence to the person whose recitation is better; he said: “The leader in prayer should be the person who

¹ Imām `Alā`uddīn Abū Bakr al-Kasānī, excerpted from *badā`i al-sanā`i fī tartīb al-sharā`i*, vol.1 p.234,235

² Probably the author of the original *tuhfat al-fuqahā*, of which this book is an exegesis.

is the best in reciting the Book of Allāh, the person who is most knowledgeable about Sunnah, and the most superior in piety, and the most elder amongst the group; the basis of this order is the Hadīth of Ibn Mas'ūd al-Ansārī ﷺ reporting from Rasūlullāh ﷺ that he said:

Let the person who best recites the Book of Allāh lead the community in prayer; if they are equal [in that quality] then, the person most knowledgeable of the Sunnah; if they are equal, then the one who migrated earliest (*aqdamuhum hijratan*); if they are equal [in it], then the eldest [in age] amongst them; if they are equal [in it], then the person with best morals, the most virtuous; if they are equal [in all these] then, the one with the more radiant face (*asbabahum wajhan*) .

Then, there are some among the masters (*mashāyikh*) who applied the Hadīth literally and gave precedence to the better reciter upon the scholar of the Sunnah because the Prophet ﷺ stated the order likewise.

But the most correct position is that the scholar of the Sunnah is more eligible IF he can recite the Qur'ān at least as properly as his prayer remains valid. And thus it is mentioned in reports (*athār*) of Abū Hanīfa because the [state of] prayer depends upon knowledge after the minimum requirement of acceptable recitation is met; because any issue during prayer can be more easily resolved with knowledge. Even proper recitation depends upon knowledge so that one can discern the mistake which invalidates the Salah. Therefore, the higher the person is in knowledge, the more qualified he is to lead prayer.

This principle is so extensive that some have said that choosing between a scholar who abstains only from the obvious abominations (*javābīsh al-ẓāhira*) and the reciter who is far more pious [who abstains from *makrūhs* and further] – the former still is more eligible to lead the prayer.

Except that the Prophet ﷺ gave precedence to the reciter, because in that age, those who were better reciters were also the most knowledgeable among the people with regards to the meanings of the Qur'ān and its rulings. But in our time, a man can be highly skilled in recitation, but has no knowledge at all; therefore [in such case as ours] the scholar is more eligible to lead the prayer.

If there are scholars, then the most pious amongst them; because after the minimum degree of acceptable recitation and knowledge, comes piety, which is very much desired [in a leader].

The Prophet ﷺ said: “**Whosoever prayed behind a pious scholar is like the one who has prayed behind a Prophet**”.

In the Hadīth, the next in order are those who migrated (*hijra*) because, emigration to Medina was obligatory in those times. It was then abrogated by his saying ﷺ: “**There is no emigration after the Victory.**” Also, the pious get precedence because of their ‘migration’ from sins and vice [towards righteousness].

If they are equal in piety, then the person who can recite the Book of Allāh in the best manner takes precedence because of the Prophet’s saying ﷺ: “**The people of Qur’ān are the people of Allāh and His elite.**”

If they are equal in their ability to recite, then the eldest among them is preferred because of the Prophet's saying ﷺ: "***The elders, the elders***".

If they are equal in age, then the one with the most beautiful character is preferred because bearing good character is meritorious and the leadership in prayer is based on merit.

If they are equal [in having a lofty character], then the more handsome amongst them, because people like handsome folk [and hence will like] to pray behind them. Some have said: "The meaning of the Hadīth '*the more beautiful in face*' actually means the person who knows many facets of a particular issue. As the idiom goes, 'one facet (*wajh*) of this particular matter is thus ...' etc.

Some others said: [it actually means] that a person who prays supererogatory prayers in the night as it has been reported in the Hadīth: "***whosoever multiplied his prayers in the night, his face becomes more radiant in the day.***"

It is not necessary to find a constrained explanation because the obvious meaning is sufficient as we explained earlier [it is natural for people to be attracted towards handsome folk]. One of the reasons for giving precedence to Imāms [in order], is that a better person will be the cause for a bigger congregation, hence [a more handsome person] will be a better a choice.

It is disliked for a guest to lead prayer in another man's home without the host's permission. The Prophet ﷺ said:

"A man should not lead another in the latter's dominion; and let him not sit in his brother's place [without his permission] because he knows those matters of his own home obscured to others."

Because a man knows what his family and relatives feel and it does not befit a person with a lofty character to do otherwise. Yes, if he gives the permission, there is nothing wrong in that case. Imām Muhammad mentioned this somewhere else: If the guest is the king, then it is permissible for him to lead the prayer without permission of the host; because permission for such a guest is already proven and as if it is a permission by documentary evidence. Because the king has the right to be the leader wherever he goes [in his dominion], which is not true for others; therefore a king can lead the prayer as a guest without the host's permission.

Allāh Ta`ālā knows best.

