

The Haj Sabaq of Al Imam al-Sajjad Ali Ibn al-Husayn (as)

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Haj Zaireen should take benefit from this Imami Sabaq before leaving for Haj.

Published: The News international; The MAG Weekly; Daily News; Pakistan.

Revised: 2026

Abstract: In the Shi'i Fatimi Ismaili tradition, Sabaq signifies a structured system of Ta'līm conducted through a Halqah under the authority of a designated Mufīd (teacher), transmitting the inherited 'ilm of the Imams and their Du'āt. This pedagogical order is rooted in divine authorization - idhn and unfolds progressively through three epistemic stages: 'ilm al-Zāhir (jurisprudence, ethics, reports, and wisdom), 'ilm al-Ta'wīl (esoteric interpretation of Wahy and Shariah), and finally 'ilm al-Haqā'iq, wherein the seeker encounters divine realities. This graded ascent underscores the principle that ritual without inner realization remains formally valid yet spiritually deficient. This framework provides the lens through which the celebrated discourse between Imam 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn (as) and the Sufī Shibli is examined. Although Shibli outwardly fulfilled the rites of Ḥajj, the Imam's relentless questioning exposes a profound absence of inward consciousness accompanying each ritual act-from Eḥrām and Talbiyah to Tawāf, Sa'y, 'Arafāh, Muzdalifah, and the stoning at Minā. Each negative response is met with a decisive spiritual negation: the ritual, stripped of its inner intention, is rendered incomplete in its ultimate purpose. The tradition, though narratively unconventional in its sequence of rites, remains consistent with the principles of Qur'an, Nabawi Sunnah, and rational spirituality. It affirms that Ḥajj is not a mere aggregation of bodily motions but a comprehensive moral and metaphysical reconstitution of the pilgrim. The Imam redefines every rite as an act of ethical severance from sin, Mithaq and Ahd with Allah, warfare against the ego, and rebirth into obedience. Within the epistemology of Sabaq, this narration exemplifies how Ta'līm transforms ritual law into lived spiritual truth. The regularity of attendance, likened to the unbroken beads of a Tasbīḥ, safeguards the continuity - Tasalsul of inner illumination. Ultimately, the tradition situates Ḥajj as a lifetime culmination that demands not only physical travel but an inward migration from disobedience to divine proximity, attainable only through Imami-guided sacred 'ilm.

Keywords: Sabaq; Talim; Ismaili Epistemology; Ḥajj; Imam Ali Zayn al-Abideen; Shibli; Ḥāhir; Tawil; Ḥāqaiq; Spiritual Pedagogy.

In the Shi'i Fatimi Ismailis the Term Sabaq is signifying a traditional system of Talim in which a designate Mufid (teacher) conducted a Halqah (circle-class) of Mustafid (students). The Sabaq is based on the Books of Imams and their Du'at on various branches of 'ilm. This tradition of Talim is continued from the era of Adam (as), with the explicit Izn (permission) of the representative of Allah, in each era. It starts with 'ilm al-Zahir which contains Fiqh, Akhbar, Hikmah, Adab, etc. The next level is 'ilm al-Tawil, which includes the intellectual meaning of the Ahk'am of Shari'ah, the Tafsir of the Qur'an. The final level is 'ilm al-Haqaiq, which open the divine realities. Those who are interested to get the Barakah of 'ilm of Aal'e Muhammad (as) should attend Halqah regularly. Sabaq attendance is like a chain or Tasbih, if anyone miss a single bead of the Tasbih he or she has lost the benefit of Tasalsul. Following conversation takes place between Al Imam Ali Zayn al-Abideen (as) and Shibli - who has shortly returned from Haj. During the course of this fascinating discourse, the Imam concisely explains the spiritual dimensions of the Haj rituals, and as we see at the end of the tradition, the Imam's words have a profound effect on Shibli, whose exact identity is unclear. Another point of debate is the fact that some of the Haj rituals mentioned in the Tradition are not stated in the order that Zaireen normally perform them. This tradition is compliant with established Talim and does not contradict the Qur'an, Sunnah, or the intellect, there is no problem in using it, and it can certainly help Zaireen to attain a deeper understanding of the Haj rituals and make their Ibadah more meaningful. Haj is a lifetime achievement, hence when anyone proceeds for it, they must prepare for it not only physically but also spiritually, and who can guide us on this preparation better than Moula Abi Abdullah al Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as). Once Al-Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as) was observing those performing Haj. He said:

"Many of them are just chanting Labbayka, but very few are performing the true rituals with reverence".

Through your every act it must be visible that you are coming here to achieve the Rahmah of Allah. The following thought-provoking guidance given by Al Imam Ali Zain al-Abideen (as) to Shaikh Abu Bakar Shibli (d. 946 A.D) is a valuable asset for each Za'ir al-Haj. Shibli was a celebrated Sufi, born and brought up at Baghdad, but the native country of his parents was Khurasan. He followed the Maliki doctrine, and "Junaid" (another famous Sufi) was his mentor. After Haj when Shibli returned home, he visited the Imam to pay respect who in turn asked him the following questions:

Q. Imam: Have you performed Haj, O Shibli?

A. Yes, O son of Rasulullah(S).

Q. Imam: Did you stop at the Miq'at, remove the clothes, and perform the recommended Ghusl?

A. Shibli: Yes

Q. Imam: When you stopped at Miq'at, were you conscious that you were removing the clothes of Ma'siyah (disobedience) and wearing the clothes of Ta'at (obedience)?

A. Shibli: No

Q. And when you changed the dress were you conscious that you were leaving hypocrisy and worldly yearnings?

A. Shibli: No

Q. Imam: And when you took the Ghusul (bath) were you conscious that you were cleaning yourself from all sins and crimes?

A. Shibli: No

The Imam then guided:

It means that you did not stop at Miq'at, nor removed clothes nor performed the Ghusl.

Q. Imam: Did you cleanse yourself and wore Ehr'am and fulfill your Niyyah of performing Haj?

A. Shibli: Yes

Q. Imam: When you offered the Niyyah of Haj, were you clear in your mind that you are cleaning yourself with the Labbayk of sincere Taubah?

A. Shibli: No

Q. Imam: when you wore the Ehr'am were you clear in your mind that you were forbidding yourself what Allah has forbidden?

A. Shibli: No.

Q. Imam: When you fulfilled the Fard Haj, were you conscious that you have nullified all other promises, other than with Allah?

A. Shibli: No

The Guidance of the Imam:

You did not cleanse yourself, nor did you wear Ehr'am, nor did you fulfill the Wajib'at of Haj.

Q. Imam: Did you enter the Miq'at and offer two Rakaat of the Ehr'am and recited Talbiyyah.

A. Shibli: Yes

Q. Imam: When you entered the Miq'at, were you conscious that you had arrived as a visitor of Allah?

A. Shibli: No

Q. Imam: When you offered two Rakaat, were you conscious that you were trying to get closer to Allah with the best of acts from the Dua, and the biggest of good deeds from the acts of Ibadah?

A. Shibli: No

Q. Imam: When you recited the Talbiyyah were you conscious that you were talking to Allah with all obedience and you left all misdeeds?

A. Shibli: No

The Guidance of the Imam:

You did not enter Miq'at nor did you offer Dua nor did you recite the Talbiyah.

Q. When you entered the Haram and saw the Kabah, did you offer Dua directly?

A. Shibli: Yes

Q. Imam: When you entered the Haram were you conscious that you would never commit the sin of backbiting?

A. Shibli: No

Q. Imam: When you reached Makkah did you take the Niyyah with all your heart and that you were in the presence of Allah?

A. Shibli: No

The Guidance of the Imam: You have neither entered Haram, nor seen the Kabah, nor offered Dua

Q. Imam: Did you go round the Kabah and did you touch the Rukn, and did you make Sae'e?

A. Shibli: yes

Q. Imam: And when you performed Sae'e were you conscious during running that you were approaching quickly towards Allah?

A. Shibli: No

The Guidance of the Imam:

You did not offer Tawaf, nor did you touch Rukn, nor did you make Sae'e.

Q. Imam: Did you kiss the Hajar al-Aswad, and did you stand at the Maqam'i Ibrahim and offer two Rak'at at the site?

A. Shibli: Yes

The Guidance of the Imam:

The Imam cried a lot saying Ah! Ah! Whoever touches the Hajar al-Aswad, it is as if he has shook hands with Allah. Then you did not destroy the reward of something whose sacredness has been made very great, and you did not spoil your handshake by disobedience and by grasping evil like the sinners.

Q. Imam asked: were you conscious while standing at Maqam'i-Ibrahim that you will put behind all your disobedience?

A. Shibli: No

Q. Imam: When you offered two Rakaat there, were you conscious that you were offering the Dua of Ibrahim and that you were humiliating Shait'an with your Dua?

A. Shibli: No

The Guidance of the Imam:

You did not stand at Maqam'I Ibrahim nor did you offer two Rakaat at the site.

Q. Imam: Did you visit the site of Zamzam, and did you drink it?

A. Shibli: Yes.

Q. Imam: were you conscious that when you saw the Zamzam you were looking at obedience to Allah and closing your eyes to all the disobedience?

A. Shibli: No.

The Guidance of the Imam:

You did not ignore it nor did you drink from the Zamzam.

Q. Did you run between the Safa and Marwa, and did you walk between it repeatedly?

A. Shibli: Yes.

Q. Imam: were you conscious that you were running between hope and fear?

A. Shibli: No

The Guidance of the Imam:

You did not run between Safa and Marwa.

Q. Imam: Did you go out to Mina?

A. Shibli: Yes.

Q. Imam: were you conscious of the fact that Muslims will remain safe from your tongue, your heart and your mind?

A. Shibli: No.

The Guidance of the Imam:

You did not go out to 'Mina'.

Q. Imam: Did you stay at Arafah, Jabal al-Rahmah, and recognized the Wadi al-Namirah and offered Dua near Al Mail and Al Jamar'at?

A. Shibli: Yes

Q. Imam: While at Arafah, did you realize where you were standing and did you realize that your book of deeds was in the presence of Allah and that He had full knowledge of your secrets and what is in your heart?

A. Shibli: No.

Q. Imam: And when you climbed the Jabal al-Rahmah were you conscious of the fact that Allah showers mercy on all believers and that He will help the entire Ummah?

A. Shibli: No.

Q. Imam: At Wadi al-Namirah were you conscious that you would not command good until you practiced it yourself, and that you would not forbid evil until you leave it yourself?

A. Shibli: No

Q. Imam: And when you stopped at Alamaiyn and al-Umara were you conscious that the Malaek were witnessing all your Ibadah and were guarding you together with your guardian Malaek by the order of Allah?

A. Shibli: No

The Guidance of the Imam:

Then you did not stay at Arafah, nor visited Jabal al-Rahmah, nor recognized the Wadi al-Namirah, nor offered Dua.

Q. Imam: Did you pass between the two columns and offer two Rak'at before crossing Muzdalifah, and picked up pebbles and crossed Al Mashar'il Har'am?

A. Shibli: Yes

Q. Imam: When you offered two Rakaat, were you conscious that you were offering Salaat al-Shukar within the ten nights, which removes every hardship and facilitates every ease?

A. Shibli: No.

Q. Imam: At the time of moving in between the two columns without deviating to the right or to the left, were you conscious that you would never deviate from the true religion with your heart and tongue nor with your limbs?

A. Shibli: No.

Q. Imam: When you walked through Muzdalifah and picked up the pebbles, were you conscious that you have plucked off all acts of disobedience of which you had affirmed knowledge and accomplishment.

A. Shibli: No.

Q. Imam: When you walked in Al Mashar'il Har'am, were you conscious to emboss your heart with the relationship of those who have Taqwa?

A. Shibli: No.

The Guidance of the Imam:

Then you did not pass between the two columns, nor did you offer the two Rakaat, nor walked into Muzdalifah, nor picked up the pebbles, nor walked in Al Mashar'il Har'am.

Q. Imam: When you arrived in Mina, did you throw stones at the Jamar'at, shave your head, made the sacrifice, offered Salaat in Masjid al-Kheef, and return to Makkah to finally perform the Tawaf al-Nisa?

A. Shibli: Yes

Q. Imam: When you reached Mina and stoned the Jamar'at, were you conscious that you have attained your goal, and that your Lord has fulfilled all your needs?

A. Shibli: No.

Q. Imam: And when you stoned the Jamar'at, were you conscious that you had attacked your enemy Iblees, and by completing this act you had challenged him?

A. Shibli: No.

Q. Imam: And when you shaved your head, were you conscious that you had purified yourself from all filth, and all the sins and injustices, as if you were a newborn baby.

A. Shibli: No.

Q. Imam: And when you slaughtered your Hadiyah were you conscious that you were cutting the artery of greed by holding fast to the reality of Taqwa and that you are following the Sunnah of Ibrahim (as), when he was prepared to slaughter his son, the apple of his eyes, through which he established the Sunnah of gaining nearness to Allah for coming generations?

A. Shibli: No.

Q. Imam: And when you returned to Makkah and performed Taw'af al-Wada, were you conscious that you had returned with the Rahmah and achieved nearness to Him?

A. Shibli: No.

The Guidance of the Imam:

Then you did not reach Mina nor did you pelt the Jamar'at, nor did you shave your head, or slaughter the Hadiyah, or offer Salaat in Masjid al-Kheef, nor did you return to Makkah and perform the Taw'af al-Nis'a.

The Guidance of the Imam:

O Shibli! Go back, because you have not performed Haj!

At the culmination of this session, Shibli started to cry with tears of sorrow because of what he had neglected in his Haj. He continued to learn the secrets of Haj until he could perform it properly through Imami-Talim and sacred understanding.

Conclusion:

The discourse between Imam Zayn al-'Ābideen (as) and Shibli powerfully demonstrates that ritual exactitude, when divorced from inward vigilance, fails to achieve its salvific end. Read through the methodology of Sabaq, the tradition affirms a hierarchical vision of Talim wherein Zahiri Shariah matures into inner certainty and finally into realized truth. The Imam's uncompromising negation of Shibli's rites is not a rejection of jurisprudence but a reaffirmation that 'ibādah attains validity only when ethical consciousness, repentance, and divine awareness accompany every movement. Thus, Hajj emerges not as a symbolic pageant but as a transformative covenant, attainable solely through disciplined Ta'līm under divinely authorized guidance.

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al-Kāfī - Shaykh al-Kulaynī (d. 329 AH), Kitāb al-Ḥajj, Bāb: Nawādir al-Ḥajj, Contains the full structured interrogation by Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn and Shiblī’s responses., This is the earliest extant hadith record of the narration. al-Kulaynī, al-Kāfī, Kitāb al-Ḥajj, Bāb Nawādir al-Ḥajj.

Man Lā Yaḥḍuru al-Faqīh - Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (d. 381 AH), Kitāb al-Ḥajj, Preserves the same dialogue with slight wording variations.

Indicates early wide circulation in Imāmī legal-spiritual literature.

Tahdhīb al-Aḥkām - Shaykh al-Tūsī (d. 460 AH), Kitāb al-Ḥajj, Transmits the narration with full isnād, Used as a legal-ethical proof-text for inward intention in ibadah.

al-Amālī - Shaykh al-Ṣadūq, Public dictation sessions., The narration appears in expanded ethical form.

Biḥār al-Anwār - al-Majlisī (d. 1111 AH), Vol. 46 (Life of Al Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn), Vol. 99 (Spiritual dimensions of Ḥajj), compilation from earlier canonical works.

The exact full dialogue is not preserved verbatim in the six canonical Sunnī books, but its substance and ethical framing appear through multiple Sunnī transmission lines, especially in Zuhd and Hikmah literature:

Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’ - Abū Nu‘aym al-Aṣḥānī (d. 430 AH), Biography of ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, Biography of Shiblī, Contains partial versions of the encounter and its ethical reprimand., Abū Nu‘aym explicitly affirms the spiritual authority of Al Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn in the exchange.

Ṣīfat al-Ṣafwah - Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597 AH), Mentions Shiblī’s encounter with the Imam in abbreviated moral form.

Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn - al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH), Kitāb Asrār al-Ḥajj, Ghazālī does not name Shiblī directly in every manuscript, but the structure of the questioning is identical: Ihrām - Niyyah, Ṭawāf - Covenant, Sa’y Hope and fear, Minā Casting desires. This section is widely acknowledged by Sunnī scholars to be drawn from early Ahl al-Bayt-based ascetic reports, particularly this dialogue.

Talbīs Iblīs - Ibn al-Jawzī; Ethical critique of formalism in Ibadah.'Uses this narration in thematic paraphrase.

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