Brief History of Early Islam after Muhammed’s Death

Muhammed made no provision for his successor.

The Muslim community was ruled by a series of Caliphs or deputies.

The first Caliph was Abu Bakr, Muhammad’s father-in-law. Many Muslims believed that Muhammed had chosen his son-in-law Ali as successor and this disagreement would lead to the Sunni/Shi’ite split with Shi’ites supporting Ali. Abu Bakr’s main accomplishment was to put down tribal rebellions in the Arabian Peninsula led by people who only converted to Islam for political reasons and wanted to take advantage of Muhammad’s death as an opportunity to abandon the faith. He died in A.D. 634.

The Second Caliph was Umar who was designated by Abu Bakr and ruled for ten years. He conquered the Persian Empire and much of the remnants of the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean. It was under Umar that Islam became a major force on the world stage.

When Umar died in 644 a council of Muhammad’s companions selected Uthman as the next Caliph. He is best known for standardizing a written text of the Qur’an. The Islamic empire expanded at a slower rate under Umar and many Muslims were accused him of nepotism and mismanagement. Muslims who believed that Muhammad’s son-in-law Ali should have been named caliph were especially resentful of Uthman. He was murdered in 656.

When Uthman was assassinated, Ali was named Caliph. However, many prominent Muslims including supporters of Uthman challenged the legality of his caliphate. The Muslim empire fell into civil war and the Sunni/Shi’ite split was solidified.

Most Shi’ites accept Muammad al-Baqir as a fifth Iman.