

17) The Number of the Prophet's Righteous Successors

Ibn Hanbal says:

A. Hasan bin Musa has related to us from Hammad bin Zayd from Mujalid from Sha'bi from Masruq who says that in Kufa 'Abdullah bin Mas'ud was giving us lessons from the Holy Qur'an when a person asked:

O Aba 'Abd al-Rahman! Did you not ask the Prophet how many caliphs would this ummah have?

'Abdullah bin Mas'ud said:

Since my coming to Iraq no one has posed me this question so far except you.

Then he added:

Yes! We did ask the Messenger of Allah (S) about this matter and he said:

"Ithna-'Ashara ka 'iddati nuqaba' Bani Isra'il (Twelve, equal to the number of the Chieftans of Bani Isra'il)." [1](#)

The isnad of this hadith are sahih according to Ahmad Shakir.

Ibn Hanbal says:

B. Sufyan bin 'Uyaynah has related to us from 'Abd al-Malik bin 'Umayr from Jabir bin Samrah al-Suwa'i who narrates that he heard the Messenger of Allah (S) say:

"La yazal hadha al-amr maziyan hatta yaqum ithna-'ashara amiran (This affair [religion] will continue until twelve leaders [Amir] will rise)."

Then he mentioned something which I did not hear, so I asked my father (who was sitting beside me), who said:

“All of whom will be from the Quraysh.”²

This hadith has been recorded over 40 times in Ibn Hanbal’s Musnad³ and in some versions the word Khalifah is found instead of Amir.⁴The version which I have selected here has the shortest chain of authority and reaches the Prophet through the medium of three narrators. Sunni scholars and exegetes of hadith have rather been perplexed and come up with unconvincing comments in their explanation of this particular hadith of the Prophet. They have been unable to reconcile with their beliefs the meaning of the figure of “twelve caliphs” as used by the Prophet. As a result we find conflicting and self-contradictory answers in their explanations.⁵

¹. Ibid, hadith no. 3781. Refer to Holy Qur’an (5:12) regarding the Nuqaba’ (Chieftans) of Bani Isra’il.

². Al-Musnad, vol. 5, p. 101. Also refer to al-Safarini, Shams al-Din Muhammad: Sharh Thulathiyat Ahmad, vol. 1, p. 539, first edition, 1380, Damascus.

³. Al-Salafi, Murshad al-Muhtar, vol. 3, p. 380.

⁴. E.g. refer to Musnad, al-Maymaniyyah print.

⁵. For more information on the views of the Sunnis refer to al-Safarini: Sharh Thulathiyat Ahmad, vol. 2, pp. 540-566. Also see al-‘Askari, Sayyid Murtaza: Naqsh-e A’immah dar Ihya’-e Din, vol. 11, pp. 74-84.

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