

20) Hadith Sadd Al-Abwab, What Doors Exactly Were Closed?

Why exactly did the Messenger of Allah, *sallallahu 'alaihi wa alihi*, order that all doors be closed except the door of Amir al-Muminin, *'alaihi al-salam*? This is a question that has engaged the *'ulama* of the Ahl al-Sunnah for centuries, with each side among them offering its difference perspective on the incident. Perhaps, the most widespread opinion among the Sunni scholars is that 'Ali was only "spared" out of mercy. His house had only one door, which was that which opened into the mosque. If it were closed, then he and his family would be sealed *inside* their house or permanently blocked from entering it. Al-Hafiz (d. 852 H) is quite explicit on this:

والمعنى ان باب علي كان إلى جهة المسجد ولم يكن لبيته باب غيره فلذلك لم يؤمر بسده

The meaning is that the door of 'Ali opens into the mosque and his house had no other door. This was why he was not commanded to close it. [1](#)

One of the most crucial evidences often quoted for this position is this *hadith* documented by Imam al-Hakim (d. 403 H):

أخبرنا أبو بكر أحمد بن جعفر بن حمدان القطيعي ببغداد من أصل كتابه ثنا عبد الله بن أحمد بن حنبل حدثني أبي ثنا يحيى بن حماد ثنا أبو عوانة ثنا أبو بلج ثنا عمرو بن ميمون قال إني لجالس عند ابن عباس إذ أتاه تسعة رهط فقالوا : يا ابن عباس : إما أن تقوم معنا وإما أن تخلو بنا من بين هؤلاء قال : فقال ابن عباس بل أنا أقوم معكم قال وهو يومئذ صحيح قبل أن يعمى قال : فابتدؤوا فتحدثوا فلا ندري ما قالوا قال فجاء ينفض ثوبه ويقول أف وتف وقعوا في رجل له بضع عشرة فضائل ليست لأحد غيره.... قال ابن عباس وسد رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم أبواب المسجد غير باب علي فكان يدخل المسجد جنباً وهو طريقه ليس له طريق غيره

Hanbal) Yahya b. Hamad – Abu Awanah – Abu Balj – ‘Amr b. Maymun:

I was sitting in the company of Ibn ‘Abbas when nine men came to him and said, “O Ibn ‘Abbas! Either you debate with us, or tell these folks that you prefer a private debate.” So, Ibn ‘Abbas said, “I would rather participate with you.” In those days, he had not lost his eye-sight yet. So they started talking, but I was not sure exactly what they were talking about.

Then he came, squeezing his robe, and saying: “Nonsense! **They are attacking a man who has ten EXCLUSIVE MERITS...** Ibn ‘Abbas said: “The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, closed the doors of the mosque except the door of ‘Ali. So he (‘Ali) used to enter the mosque after having a seminal discharge before performing the purification bath. **It (i.e. the mosque) was his pathway, and he had no other pathway except it.**”[2](#)

Al-Hakim states:

هذا حديث صحيح الإسناد

This *hadith* has a *sahih* chain[3](#)

Imam al-Dhahabi (d. 748 H) agrees:

صحيح

Sahih[4](#)

If we accepted al-Hafiz’s understanding of the *hadith*, then there would be no value in it for ‘Ali. After all, if another Sahabi had fallen into a similar “predicament”, he would have been treated similarly “out of mercy”. Therefore, it would be an “ordinary” incident with no special significance to it. However, that theory lacks strength in many respects. First, Ibn ‘Abbas, *radhiyallahu ‘anhu*, considered the *hadith* to be a “merit” of ‘Ali, in fact his “*exclusive* merit”! This reveals very clearly that our Hafiz understood the reports very wrongly.

Even though ‘Ali had only one door, that was NOT the reason he was allowed to open it. He certainly could have been ordered to relocate the door to the opposite side of his house; and he would have achieved that within hours.

So, there was clearly a choice in the matter. But, the Prophet deemed it unnecessary. In fact, it is obvious from Ibn ‘Abbas’ words that even if there had been many doors to the house of ‘Ali, he still would have been exempted from the closure order. After all, the Messenger purposely left open his door to highlight his “exclusive merit” over the rest of the Sahabah.

Interestingly, Ibn ‘Umar also understood the incident as indicating a unique rank. Al-Hafiz states:

واخرج النسائي من طريق العلاء بن عرار بمهمات قال فقلت لابن عمر أخبرني عن علي وعثمان فذكر الحديث وفيه وأما علي فلا تسأل عنه أحدا وانظر إلى منزلته من رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قد سد أبوابنا في المسجد وأقر بابه ورجاله رجال الصحيح الا العلاء وقد وثقه يحيى بن معين وغيره

وهذه الأحاديث يقوي بعضها بعضا وكل طريق منها صالح للاحتجاج فضلا عن مجموعها

And al-Nasai recorded through the route of al-‘Ala b. ‘Arar: “I said to Ibn ‘Umar: ‘Tell me about ‘Ali and ‘Uthman.’” Then he (al-Nasai) mentioned the *hadith* (as above), and added (that Ibn ‘Umar said), “As for ‘Ali, do not ask anyone about him. **Just look at his status from the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him. He had closed our doors in the mosques and left his door open.**” Its narrators are narrators of the *Sahih* except al-‘Ala, and Yahya b. Ma’in and others have declared him *thiqah* (trustworthy).

These *ahadith* strengthen one another, **and each of the chains is qualified to be used as a *hujjah***, much less their combination.⁵

What exactly was this status? Imam Ahmad (d. 241 H) records a *hadith* that gives the answer:

حدثنا عبد الله حدثني أبي ثنا عبد الله بن نمير قال ثنا موسى الجهني قال حدثني فاطمة بنت علي قالت حدثني أسماء بنت عميس قالت سمعت رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم يقول: يا علي أنت مني بمنزلة هارون من موسى الا انه ليس بعدي نبي

‘Abd Allah – my father (Ahmad b. Hanbal) – ‘Abd Allah b. Numayr – Musa al-Juhani – Fatimah bint ‘Ali – Asma bint ‘Umays:

I heard the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, saying: “**O ‘Ali! You are to me of the status of Harun to Musa** except that there is no prophet after me.”⁶

Shaykh al-Arnaut comments:

إسناده صحيح

Its chain is *sahih*⁷

So, Imam ‘Ali was exempted from the closure order to highlight his status as the Harun of our *Ummah* – the spiritual, political and military lieutenant of our Prophet. Quite strangely though, Ibn ‘Umar and some

other Sahabah did not think that this status of ‘Ali placed him above Abu Bakr and ‘Umar! How they managed to arrive at such a weird conclusion is a mystery of mysteries.

In a related *riwayah*, Ibn ‘Umar even revealed a fact that changes the game even more drastically. Imam al-Nasai (d. 303 H) records:

أخبرنا أحمد بن سليمان قال حدثنا عبيد الله قال حدثنا إسرائيل عن أبي إسحاق عن العلاء بن عرار قال سألت بن عمر وهو في مسجد رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم عن علي وعثمان فقال أما علي فلا تسألني عنه وانظر إلى منزله من رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم ليس في المسجد بيت غير بيته وأما عثمان فإنه أذنب ذنبا عظيما يوم التقى الجمعان فعفى الله عنه وغفر له وأذنب فيكم ذنبا دون فقتلتموه

Ahmad b. Sulayman – ‘Abd Allah – Israil – Abu Ishaq – al-‘Ala b. ‘Arar:

I asked Ibn ‘Umar while he was in the mosque of the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, concerning ‘Ali and ‘Uthman. So, he replied, “As for ‘Ali, then do not ask me concerning him. Just look at his apartment from (the apartment of) the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him. **There is NO house in the mosque apart from his house.** As for ‘Uthman, he committed a terrible sin on the day when the two armies met (i.e. at Uhud when he fled). But Allah pardoned and forgave him. Then, he committed another sin among you, and you killed him.”⁸

Both Dr. Bandari and Sayyid Hasan jointly state:

صحيح رجاله ثقات

It is *sahih*. Its narrators are trustworthy.⁹

Imam al-Bukhari (d. 256 H) also documents:

حدثنا محمد بن رافع حدثنا حسين عن زائدة عن أبي حصين عن سعد بن عبيدة قال :جاء رجل إلى ابن عمر فسأله عن عثمان فذكر عن محاسن عمله قال لعل ذاك يسؤوك ؟ قال نعم قال فأرغم الله بأنفك ثم سأله عن علي فذكر محاسن عمله قال هو ذاك بيته أوسط بيوت النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم ثم قال لعل ذاك يسؤوك ؟ قال أجل قال فأرغم الله بأنفك انطلق فاجهد علي جهدك

Muhammad b. Rafi’ – Husayn – Zaidah – Abu Husayn – Sad b. ‘Ubaydah:

A man came to Ibn ‘Umar and asked about ‘Uthman. So, he (i.e. Ibn ‘Umar) mentioned his good deeds and said to the questioner. “Perhaps these facts annoy you?” He (the questioner) answered, “Yes.” Ibn ‘Umar said, “May Allah stick your nose in the dust!” Then he (the man) asked him (i.e. Ibn ‘Umar) about ‘Ali. So, he (i.e. Ibn ‘Umar) mentioned his good deeds and said, “He (‘Ali) is this. **His house is in the**

midst of the houses of the Prophet, peace be upon him. Perhaps these facts have hurt you?” He (i.e. the questioner) said, “Of course.” He (i.e. Ibn ‘Umar) said, “May Allah stick your nose in the dust! Go away and do whatever you can against me.”¹⁰

This incident clearly took place after the death of ‘Uthman. A number of fundamental facts are discernible from the reports:

1. The purpose of the closure order was to “detach” all houses from the mosque of the Prophet, except his own houses and that of Amir al-Muminin.
2. Once it was impossible to move directly from the *mihrab* (prayer chambers) into the house, it was deemed “detached”.
3. Therefore, once the order was given to close all doors except that of ‘Ali only, the houses of the other Sahabah – including that of Abu Bakr – permanently ceased to have any entry or exit point into the mosque. Through this, they were literally detached from the *mihrab* of the *masjid*.
4. This was the case till after the death of ‘Uthman.
5. As such, Abu Bakr had NO house “attached” to the mosque at the time when the Messenger was allegedly ordering that all “wickets” be closed! How did Abu Bakr possess a wicket when he no longer had any house in the mosque?!
6. Ibn ‘Umar thought that the order to spare only the house of ‘Ali in the mosque is indicative of the latter’s special rank in the Sight of Allah and His Messenger.
7. The Prophet allowed the house of ‘Ali to be in the midst of his own houses facing *into* the mosque. He never granted the same honour to any other creature!

This is our query to our brothers from the Ahl al-Sunnah: how did Abu Bakr manage to have a wicket, or a door, during the Prophet’s fatal illness when he no longer had *any* house facing into the *masjid*? He used to have. But, once the order for closure was issued earlier, he and all other Muslims – with the sole exception of the Messenger of Allah and Imam ‘Ali – “detached” their houses from the mosque by permanently sealing their doors opening into it. This remained the case till, at least, after the death of ‘Uthman. So, how could Abu Bakr have had any wicket or door in that circumstance? Where did his apparently *imaginary* “wicket” and “door” come from?

Ironically, our Sunni brothers have hinged some of their *real* beliefs on this fiction of Abu Bakr’s “wicket” and “door”! Interestingly, however, their statements concerning those two also reveal a lot about the full meaning of *Hadith Sadd al-Abwab*. For instance, al-Hafiz Ibn Kathir (d. 774 H) states:

وفي قوله عليه السلام سدوا عني كل خوخة - يعني الأبواب الصغار - إلى المسجد غير خوخة أبي بكر إشارة إلى

الخلافة أي ليخرج منها إلى الصلاة بالمسلمين.

And in his statement, peace be upon him, “Close all wickets opening into the mosque except the wicket of Abu Bakr”, is **an indication towards the *khalifah***, that is, so that he could pass through it (into the mosque) to lead the Muslims in *Salat*. [11](#)

Therefore, by opening the *imaginary* wicket of Abu Bakr, the Prophet was announcing him as his *khalifah*. The Imam of Muslims, who would be leading them in *Salat* in the mosque of the Messenger, must have his residence forming part of it, like the Prophet too. This establishes beyond doubt that when the Messenger of Allah left open the *real* door of Amir al-Muminin and closed all others, he was indicating to all the Sahabah that the latter was to be his *real* legitimate *khalifah*.

Imam al-Mubarakfuri (d. 1282 H) also says:

وفي حديث أبي سعيد عند البخاري في المناقب لا يبقين في المسجد باب إلا سد إلا باب أبي بكر وفي الهجرة لا تبقي في المسجد خوذة إلا خوذة أبي بكر وكذا عند الترمذي كما تقدم قال الخطابي وابن بطال وغيرهما في هذا الحديث اختصاص ظاهر لأبي بكر رضي الله عنه وفيه إشارة قوية إلى استحقاقه للخلافة

In the *hadith* of Abu Sa'id, recorded by al-Bukhari in the Chapter of *al-Manaqib*, it is read, “Close all doors in the mosque except the door of Abu Bakr.” In the Chapter of *al-Hijrah*, it is read, “No wicket shall remain in the mosque except the wicket of Abu Bakr”. This is how it is recorded by al-Tirmidhi too, as previously stated. Al-Khattabi and Ibn Battal and others said that in this *hadith* is **a clear, exclusive merit** for Abu Bakr, may Allah be pleased with him, **and in it is a strong indication of his entitlement to the *khalifah***. [12](#)

So, by leaving open the *real* door of Amir al-Muminin, the Messenger of Allah was confirming for him a clear, *exclusive* merit and affirming his right to the *khalifah* before anyone else. Imam al-Ayni (d. 855) adds his few cents too:

قوله خوذة بفتح المعجمتين بينهما واو ساكنة هو الباب الصغير وكان بعض الصحابة فتحوا أبوابا في ديارهم إلى المسجد فأمر الشارع بسدها كلها إلا خوذة أبي بكر ليتميز بذلك فضله وفيه إيحاء إلى الخلافة

His statement “wicket” refers to the small door. Some of the Sahabah used to open the doors of their houses into the mosque. So, the Law-Giver (i.e. Allah) ordered that the closure of all of them except the wicket of Abu Bakr, **to establish his superiority through that, and in it is a gesture towards the *khalifah***. [13](#)

In other words, ‘Ali was the best of the Sahabah, on account of *Hadith Sadd al-Abwab*, and was the first legitimate *khalifah* among them! Al-Hafiz makes an even more groundbreaking submission which

reaches far to the very heart of Sunni Islam:

وقد ادعى بعضهم ان الباب كناية عن الخلافة والامر بالسد كناية عن طلبها كأنه قال لا يطلب أحد الخلافة الا أبا بكر فإنه لا حرج عليه في طلبها والى هذا جنح ابن حبان فقال بعد أن اخرج هذا الحديث في هذا الحديث دليل على أنه الخليفة بعد النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم لأنه حسم بقوله سدوا عني كل خوذة في المسجد أطماع الناس كلهم عن أن يكونوا خلفاء بعده

Some of them (i.e. the Sunni scholars) have claimed that the “door” (in the *ahadith*) is equivalent to the *khilafah*. So, the order of closure is equivalent to an order against seeking it (i.e. the *khilafah*). It was as though he said, “None should seek the *khilafah* except Abu Bakr, because there is no blame on him in seeking it.” Ibn Hibban subscribed to this view, and so said after recording this *hadith*: **“In this *hadith* is a proof that he (Abu Bakr) was the *khalifah* after the Prophet, peace be upon him, because he (the Messenger) terminated – through his statement ‘Close all wickets in the mosque’ – the desire of all (other) human beings to become *khalifahs* after him.”**¹⁴

We agree wholly that the “door” symbolized the *khilafah*. As such, when Allah closed the doors of Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman and others, He literally banned them forever from ever becoming legitimate *khalifahs* of His Prophet. By leaving open only the door of ‘Ali, Allah and His Messenger explicitly restricted the true *khilafah* to him and his descendants – to his household.

The severe dilemma of the Sunni position is that even *IF* it is agreed, for the sake of argument, that Abu Bakr’s “wicket” and “door” had been real, then the *hadith* would only have proved his *khilafah* and delegitimized those of ‘Umar, ‘Uthman, Amir al-Muminin, Mu’awiyah and others! The *khilafah* would have been the right and preserve of Abu Bakr and his descendants, to the exclusion of all others!

¹. Shihab al-Din Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, Fath al-Bari Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifah li al-Taba’ah wa al-Nashr; 2nd edition), vol. 7, p. 13

². Abu ‘Abd Allah Muhammad b. ‘Abd Allah al-Hakim al-Naysaburi, al-Mustadrak ‘ala al-Sahihayn (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah; 1st edition, 1411 H) [annotator: Mustafa ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Ata], vol. 3, p. 143, # 4652

³. Ibid

⁴. Ibid

⁵. Shihab al-Din Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, Fath al-Bari Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifah li al-Taba’ah wa al-Nashr; 2nd edition), vol. 7, p. 13

⁶. Abu ‘Abd Allah Ahmad b. Hanbal al-Shaybani, Musnad (Cairo: Muassasat Qurtubah) [annotator: Shu’ayb al-Arnaut], vol. 6, p. 438, # 27507

⁷. Ibid

⁸. Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman Ahmad b. Shu’ayb al-Nasai, Sunan al-Kubra (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah; 1st edition, 1411 H) [annotator: Dr. ‘Abd al-Ghaffar Sulayman al-Bandari and Sayyid Kasrawi Hasan], vol. 5, p. 138, # 8491

⁹. Ibid

¹⁰. Abu ‘Abd Allah Muhammad b. Isma’il b. Ibrahim b. Mughirah al-Bukhari al-Ju’fi, al-Jami’ al-Sahih al-Mukhtasar (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir; 3rd edition, 1407 H) [annotator: Dr. Mustafa Dib al-Bagha], vol. 3, p. 1358, # 3501

¹¹. Abu al-Fida Isma’il b. Kathir al-Dimashqi, al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah (Dar Ihya al-Turath al-‘Arabi; 1st edition, 1408 H) [annotator: ‘Ali Shiri], vol. 5, p. 251

- [12.](#) Abu al-‘Ala Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Rahman b. ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Mubarakfuri, *Tuhfat al-Ahwazi bi Sharh Jami’ al-Tirmidhi* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah; 1st edition, 1410 H), vol. 10, p. 112
- [13.](#) Badr al-Din al-‘Ayni, *Umdah al-Qari Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 17, p. 39, # 386
- [14.](#) Shihab al-Din Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifah li al-Taba’ah wa al-Nashr; 2nd edition), vol. 7, p. 12
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