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Appointment of 'Ali: Explicit or Implicit?

1. Introduction

We have gathered here tonight in memory of the person who has given us our identity as "Shi'a Muslims". We take pride in calling ourselves "Shi'as of 'Ali" – the Partisans or Followers of 'Ali bin Abi Talib (a.s.).

Tonight I am going to talk on the caliphate of Imam 'Ali bin Abi Talib because of questions asked by many people about the recent controversy on "the explicit appointment" of the Imam to the position of caliphate versus "the implicit appointment". Not only adults, but also youths have approached me with this question; and it is my duty to ensure that the beliefs of our youths in the imamate and caliphate of Amir al–Mu'minin stays firm without any shadow of doubt.

The controversy started regarding the statement of a learned Shi'a scholar published in the *Bio Ethics Encyclopaedia* under the entry of "Islam" in which he writes:

"Muhammad died in 632 C.E., having brought the whole of Arabia under the Medina government. However, he had left no explicit instructions regarding succession to his religious-political authority."2

Initially, when I was given a copy of the article, I did not think much of it because I realized that it was a paper written for a very wide audience. (Although ideally the issue of succession should not have been mentioned in that article at all, its deletion would not have harmed the main body of the article.)

However, the response of the learned writer to the questions sent to him via internet by some Shi'as from the U.K. became a matter of concern for me. He responded as follows:

"On the question whether there was no EXPLICIT instruction regarding succession to the Prophet's 'religious-political authority' let it be clear that the statement while asserting that there were no EXPLICIT (that is, distinctly expressed, clearly stated, not merely implied) instruction in the matter of succession to the 'Prophet's religious-political authority,' it asserts by implication that there was an IMPLICIT (that is, necessarily involved though not plainly expressed) direction in the matter. This implicit direction of the

Prophet was expressed on several occasions in his lifetime, including finally at al-Ghadir.

"It was also because of this absence of explicit statement on these occasions that Imam 'Ali never used any of these occasions, including al-Ghadir, to put forward his candidacy as the only rightful successor of the Prophet."3

After the 21st of Ramadhan 1418, the learned scholar issued another statement in which he reaffirmed his belief in the absence of the explicit appointment of Imam 'Ali by writing:

"The foundation of our faith, that is the Shi'a faith, is based on this IMPLICIT sense. Historically (the only position that can be taken in the article here) the source of dissension in the early community was the absence of EXPLICIT directions regarding the succession in the community."

"The statement of the wilaya (man kuntu mawla[hu] fa hadha 'Aliyyun mawla[hu]), which is the documentation for the Shi'a acclamation in support of the Imamate of Imam 'Ali, is regarded as an implicit rather than explicit statement of the Prophet regarding the 'succession of his comprehensive authority.' The reason is that the word mawla in Arabic is ambiguous as far as the 'succession' itself is concerned."4

2. The Explicit vs Implicit

First let us see whether or not this division of appointment of caliphate into "implicit" and "explicit" has any historical precedence in the history of Islamic theology. For the sake of time restraint, let me just state the following historical facts:

- 1. On the issue of caliphate, the Muslims have different views. The **Sunni** Muslims do not believe that the Prophet appointed anyone as his successor, neither explicitly nor implicitly; and that it was left for the community to choose whomsoever they wanted. The **Shi'as**, on the other hand, believe that the Prophet appointed 'Ali bin Abi Talib as the caliph and successor after him.
- 2. All the **Shi'a sects** (i.e., the Imamiyya/Ithna-'Ashariyya and both the existing Isma'iliyya groups: the Bohras and the Agha Khanis) believe that the Prophet of Islam explicitly appointed Imam 'Ali on many occasions as his caliph and successor.
- 3. The **Zaydiyya** sect has a belief different from the Sunnis as well as the Shi'as. Although they believe that 'Ali was the best and the most qualified for caliphate, they still accept Abu Bakr and 'Umar ibn al-Khattab as the first and the second successors of the Prophet respectfully; but they do not accept 'Uthman bin 'Affan as the third caliph.
- 4. Historically speaking, it is the **Jarudiyya** sub-sect of the Zaydiyya that believed that the Prophet had appointed Imam 'Ali not by naming him but by just describing his qualities: "nassa bi 'l-wasf duna 't-tasmiyya he [the Prophet] appointed by the description without naming [the person]."5

It is from this belief that the *nass* (the directive for appointment) is divided into "*an-nass al-jali*-the clear/explicit directive" and "*an-nass al-khafi*-the hidden/implicit directive".

But the Shi'a **Imamiyya** Ithna-'Ashariyya have never subscribed to the idea that "the foundation of our faith is based on this implicit sense." They have believed all along that the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) on several occasions, very clearly and very openly appointed 'Ali bin Abi Talib as his successor, caliph and Imam of the Muslims after him.6

Only when the Shi'a Imamiyya theologians were in debate against their opponents (including the Zaydiyya), they used the term "an-nass al-jali" on the principle of dealing with the opponent on his own terms.7

So historically speaking, no Shi'a Imamiyya theologian has treaded exclusively the path of implicit or implied appointment of Amiru 'I-Mu'minin 'Ali bin Abi Talib (a.s.) as "the foundation of our faith" and none of them have taken the hadith of Ghadir as an implicit appointment.

5. **Why** did the Zaydiyya insist on the implicitness of the appointment of 'Ali to caliphate? Since some of their sub-sects had accepted the caliphate of Abu Bakr and 'Umar, believing in the explicit statements of the Prophet appointing 'Ali would portray those two caliphs in a very negative light-it would mean that they knowingly opposed the explicit statements of the Prophet! So in order to safeguard the prestige of the first two caliphs, the appointment of 'Ali was shrouded in ambiguity by saying that it was not explicit but only implied. And since it was not explicit, the caliphs could not be blamed for usurping the caliphate from Amiru 'I-Mu'minin 'Ali!

This shows the serious implications of believing that the appointment of 'Ali was only implicit; it would mean that the blame of whatever happened after the Prophet's death on the issue of succession is to be placed on the Prophet himself, and not on the caliphs. It would mean that the first two caliphs are not to be blamed for usurping the caliphate from Imam 'Ali because they were doing what they thought, in the absence of any explicit instruction, was the best for Islam.

So when the objections of the Shi'a community against the learned scholar increased, in the last days of Ramadhan 1418, he issued a general circular addressed to the Shi'as via the Internet:

"I am taking this opportunity to state in the most ABSOLUTE terms that not only do I believe in the unequivocal authenticity of the event of al-Ghadir which took place on the 18th of Dhul-Hijja, 11AH/632 CE; I believe that the statement by the Prophet 'Everyone whose master I am, also has 'Ali as a master,' to be the explicit designation of the Imam 'Ali to the office of the Leadership of the Muslim Community, as upheld by the Twelver Shi'a faith."8

3. The First Explicit Appointment

Islam began when the Prophet became 40 years old. Initially, the mission was kept a secret. Then three years after the advent of Islam, the Prophet was ordered to commence the open declaration of his message. This was the occasion when Almighty Allah revealed the verse

"And warn thy nearest relations." (26:214)

When this verse was revealed, the Prophet organized a feast which is known as "the Feast of the Clan" (da'wat dhi 'l-'ashira). This is the first time that the Prophet openly and publicly called the relations to accept him as the Messenger and Prophet of Allah. It is also the same feast in which the Prophet declared 'Ali bin Abi Talib very openly, very clearly, and very explicitly as his successor and caliph. I will just summarize what the Prophet said:

O Sons of 'Abdu 'I–Muttalib! By Allah, I do not know of any person among the Arabs who has come to his people with better than what I have brought to you. I have brought to you the good of this world and the next, and I have been commanded by the Lord to call you unto Him. Therefore, who amongst you will support me in this matter so that he may be my brother (*akhi*), my successor (*wasiyyi*) and my caliph (*khalifati*)?

The Prophet (s.a.w.) used the words "my brother, my successor, my caliph". This is as explicit as it can get in the very first call to Islam! No one answered except 'Ali bin Abi Talib who was only around fifteen years old at that time. The Prophet called 'Ali closer to himself, patted his neck, and said:

"Verily this is my brother, my successor, and my caliph amongst you. Therefore, listen to him and obey."9

This is very explicit because the audience understand the appointment of 'Ali very clearly. Some of them, including Abu Lahab, even joked with Abu Talib that your nephew, Muhammad, has ordered you to listen to and obey your own son! At the least, this shows that the appointment was clear and explicit, not just implied.

The greatest proof of the explicit nature of this appointment at the very early stage of Prophet Muhammad's mission is the attempt by Sunni writers to conceal the words used by the Prophet. For example, the famous Muslim historian, Ibn Jarir at–Tabari (d. 310 AH), has recorded this incident with the crucial words intact in his *Ta'rikhu 'I–Umam wa 'I–Muluk*.

The 1879 edition of his *Ta'rikh*, published in Leiden (Netherlands) has the words: "...this is my brother, my successor and my caliph..." But when it came to at–Tabari's *Tafsir*, while commenting on the verse 26:214, at–Tabari himself or the editors have changed the words as follows: "...this is my brother, and so–and–so..."

All these attempts to delete the whole incident from the pages of history or change the crucial words "my

successor and my caliph" into "so-and-so" clearly shows that those terms were very explicit in supporting the appointment of Imam 'Ali as the successor of the Prophet. If it had been otherwise, then there was no need on the part of our opponents to hide or change these words.

4. Abu Sufyan Knew But Others Didn't?

Insisting on the implicitness of the appointment of 'Ali safeguards the prestige of the first two caliphs. Instead of looking for the truth and then judging the people, they want to twist the truth to safeguard the positions of the people.

It is difficult to believe that the companions of the Prophet did not hear him appointing 'Ali on so many different occasions; and knowing that they were Arabic speaking Qurayshi, it is unacceptable to think that they did not clearly understand the appointment. One way of knowing this is to go to an interesting turn of event that took place after the Prophet's death.

When 'Ali and the Banu Hashim were busy in the funeral rites of the Prophet, a person comes to their door and offers his help for caliphate. That person was Abu Sufyan. Yes, Abu Sufyan, the archenemy of the Prophet who fought many battles against Islam and Muslims, and only surrendered when he could no longer fight the Muslims. He surrendered just a couple of years before the Prophet's death.

He comes to 'Ali's house and recites a poem in the praise of the Prophet's family. Then he said: "O Banu Hashim! O Banu 'Abd Manaf! Will you accept that Abu Fasil...rules over you? By Allah! If you wish, I can fill it [i.e., the city of Medina] with horses and soldiers."

'Ali bin Abi Talib knew that Abu Sufyan was not sincere, that he was just trying to take advantage of the conflict on the issue of succession after the Prophet. Abu Sufyan wanted Banu Hashim and the group of Abu Bakr/'Umar to fight one another and weaken one another so that Banu Umayya could take advantage of the situation and gain its lost supremacy over the Arabs. And so Imam 'Ali replied: "Go away, O Abu Sufyan! By Allah you do not mean what you are saying! You have always been deceiving Islam and its people; and we are busy with [the funeral of] the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.). And [as for those who are conspiring for caliphate], each person is responsible for what he does." 10

It is indeed unbelievable that Abu Sufyan, with his background, knew that 'Ali had the right to caliphate while the other 'great' companions did not know or did not understand the Prophet clearly.

It seems that Abu Sufyan further tried to incite 'Ali to take up arms for his right of caliphate. At that time, 'Ali responded by saying: "If I speak [for my right], they say, 'He is hungry for power.' And if I keep quiet, they say, 'He fears death.' No, not at all; after all that chaos. By Allah, this son of Abu Talib is more at ease with death than an infant is at its mother's breast!"11

5. Why Didn't 'Ali Use These Arguments?

Did Imam 'Ali not use the arguments of Da'wat dhi 'I-'Ashira or Ghadir soon after the Prophet's death because they were just implicit statements? The learned Shi'a scholar wrote: "It is also because of this absence of explicit statement on these occasions that Imam 'Ali never used any of these occasions, including al-Ghadir, to put forward his candidacy as the only rightful successor of the Prophet." 12 This is indeed a novel way of looking at the conflict of caliphate. The Sunni opponent would just extend this view a little bit further and say that 'Ali did not use these arguments because there was no argument at all.

In order to understand why 'Ali did not use the arguments at that particular time, we have to understand the circumstances, the opponents, and the consequences of the actions of Imam 'Ali (a.s.).

The Circumstances

When the Prophet passed away from this world, there were different kinds of people among the Muslim community.

First there was the so-called fifth columnists among the Muslims who were waiting for a civil war so as to put an end to Islam and gain power over the Arabs. Abu Sufyan and his clan represented this group. They were neither in Saqifa nor with 'Ali bin Abi Talib. The Qur'an also talks about the presence of hypocrites among the Muslims. (See 9:97.) Then there was Musaylima al-Kadhdhab and Sajjah bint al-Harath both claimed prophethood and had gained some following among the Bedouins.

After surveying the circumstances, what could 'Ali have done?

Let me give you an example to illustrate the decision of Imam 'Ali. During the caliphate of 'Umar, there is a story of an infant who was being claimed by two women as their baby. The decision was forwarded to Imam 'Ali. When the Imam found both women insisting on their claim, he ordered that the infant be cut into two, and each woman be given one half. What was the reaction of the real mother and the fake mother? The fake mother decided to go along with the decision even if it meant cutting the baby into two halves whereas the real mother announced her readiness to give up the child.

Islam is the baby in our discussion; the usurpers would do anything to keep the power even if it meant endangering the survival of Islam itself. 'Ali, on the other hand, as the true custodian of Islam, was prepared to relinquish the power for sake of saving Islam from total destruction. That is why Imam 'Ali did not resort to the sword or allow Abu Sufyan and others to incite him into armed opposition. He accepted deprivation of his personal right of caliphate over the destruction of Islam.

He accepted deprivation but did not stop from protesting whenever and wherever the chance availed itself for him. When he was deprived again after 'Umar's death, he addressed the Consultative Committee who had chosen 'Uthman and said, "You have certainly known that I am the most rightful of

all others for the caliphate. By Allah, so long as the affairs of the Muslims remain intact and there is no oppression in it save on myself, I shall be quiet..."13

The Opponents

As for the opponents, they were not ready to listen to any word of reason. When you know that your opponents are not opposing you because of ignorance, and that they are ready even to kill you-there is no sense in mentioning all the proofs right there and then. You may wonder why I am saying this.

You recall that in the Da'wat dhi 'l-'Ashira, the Prophet had used three words for Imam 'Ali: "my brother, my successor, and my caliph." The last two terms were very crucial for the claim of 'Ali to caliphate. The first one "my brother" was not that forceful or threatening to the opponents. That is why even when the Sunni writers started concealing the hadith of the Prophet, they left the words "my brother" intact but they replaced the words "my successor, my caliph" with the words "so-and-so".

Now to understand the attitude and obstinacy of the opponents of 'Ali, let us see just one part of the heated exchange of words between Imam 'Ali (a.s.) and 'Umar ibn al-Khattab during those early days of caliphate.

I will just summarize what happened before the actual conversation: After 'Umar and his group imposed Abu Bakr over the Ansar (the inhabitants of Medina) at Saqifa, they came to the Prophet's Mosque and declared that Abu Bakr has been chosen as the caliph so all should come and pledge allegiance to him.

Then they were informed that 'Ali, other members of Banu Hashim and some prominent companions of the Prophet had gathered in the house of Fatima, refusing to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr sent messages but nobody came to pledge allegiance (*bay'at*). Then 'Umar came with his people and even put firewood at the door to burn the house down if no one came out! They finally forced the door open, injuring Fatima in the process, and forcefully brought all people to the Mosque to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr.

Imam 'Ali was also arrested and brought to the Mosque. There was an exchange of words between the Imam and Abu Bakr in which the Imam used only the argument used by the Quraysh (Meccans) against the Ansar. The Quraysh had gained the upper hand over the Ansar by saying that the Prophet was from their tribe, therefore, they have more right to the caliphate; Imam 'Ali extended that line of argument and said that we are from the family of the Prophet, therefore, we have more right to the caliphate than you.14

Ibn Qutayba ad-Dinwari, a Sunni historian of caliphate, continues the narration:

They said to 'Ali: "Pledge allegiance!"

'Ali said: "If I do not do, then what?"

They said: "Then, by Allah besides whom there

is no god, we shall chop off your neck!"

'Ali said: "Then you would be killing a servant

of Allah and the brother of His Messenger!"

'Umar said: "As for being a servant of Allah, yes;

as for being the brother of His Messenger, no! 15

What does this statement of 'Umar say? Out of the three things that the Prophet had mentioned about Imam 'Ali, the least threatening was "my brother," but during those days, 'Umar was not even prepared to accept 'Ali as "the brother of the Prophet"! Now you tell me why 'Ali did not say, "I am also the Prophet's successor and caliph"?

Ibn Qutaybah goes on with his narration: While this conversation between Imam 'Ali and 'Umar was going on, "Abu Bakr was silent, not saying anything. Then 'Umar turned to him and said, 'Why don't you issue your order concerning him?' Abu Bakr said, 'I do not wish to impose anything on him as long as Fatima is by his side."

Yes, it was Fatima who protected the life of 'Ali during those bleak days of the Muslim history. 'Ali leaves the oppressive atmosphere, goes to the Prophet's grave and complains by addressing the Prophet: "O son of my mother! The people oppressed me and had almost killed me." These are the same words Harun used to complain about the Israelites when Prophet Musa came back with the Tawrat. (See 7:150) Remember that the Prophet of Islam himself had said, "O 'Ali, you are to me like Harun was to Musa; except that there is no prophet after me."16

6. Didn't 'Ali Ever Use These Arguments?

'Ali did not use the arguments during the early days of caliphate for two reasons: 1. for the sake of Islam's well-being and survival; 2. because of the obstinacy of his opponents. It had nothing to do with the implicit vs. explicit nature of appointment. The truth is that whenever the opportunity availed itself, Imam 'Ali always talked about his right to the caliphate of the Prophet.

No one can blame 'Ali for making the claim or presenting its proof at a later date. He himself said, "No person is to be blamed for delay in (securing) his own right but the blame lies on him who takes what he is not entitled to."17

In the year 35 AH, while the Imam was in Kufa, he heard that some people doubted his claim of precedence over the previous three caliphs. Therefore, he came to the gathering at the mosque and implored the eyewitnesses of the event of Ghadir Khumm to verify the truth of the Prophet's declaration

about his being "the *mawla*" (master, leader, lord) of those whose master was the Prophet himself. In most sources, we have the names of twenty four companions of the Prophet who testified to the truth of Imam 'Ali's claim. Other sources like *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal and *Majma'u 'z–Zawa'id* of al–Haythami put that number at thirty. 18

One should bear in mind that this incident took place 25 years after the event of Ghadir Khumm, and during that period hundreds of eyewitnesses had died naturally or in the battles fought during that time. Add to this the fact that this incident took place in Kufa which was far from Medina, the center of the companions.

- 1. This section is based on the notes of two lectures in memory of Imam 'Ali bin Abi Talib (a.s.) given at Ja'fari Islamic Centre, Toronto, on the eve of 19th and 21st Ramadhan, 1418 (1998).
- 2. Abdulaziz Sachedina, "Islam," The Bio Ethics Encyclopaedia, vol. 3 (1995) p. 1289.
- 3. See the response of Dr. Sachedina widely distributed on the inter-net among the Shi'as.
- 4. See Sachedina's circular addressed to "All the Followers of the Ahlul-Bayt".
- 5. See 'Allama al-Hilli, Manahiju 'l-Yaqin, ed. M.R. al-Ansari (Qum, 1416) p. 306; al-Mufid, Awa'ilu 'l-Maqalat, p. 41-42. After 'Ali, the Zaydiyya believe in Hasan and Husayn, and then in Zayd bin 'Ali. After Zayd, any descendant of 'Ali and Fatima who does jihad against the tyrants, is pious and is learned in religion can become their Imam.
- <u>6.</u> See an-Nawbakhti (circ. 3rd century AH), Firaqu 'sh-Shi'a (Beirut, 1984) p. 19. This book is actually a summarized version of Maqalatu 'l-Imamiyya of Sa'd bin 'Abdullah al-Ash'ari al-Qummi and has been erroneously attributed to an-Nawbakhti. See S.M. Riza al-Husayni al-Jalali, "Firaqu 'sh-Shi'a' aw 'Maqalatu 'l-Imamiyya' li 'n-Nawbakhti am li 'l-'Ashari?" in the first issue of Turathuna, (Qum: Mu'assasa Ali 'l-Bayt, 1405) pp. 29-49.
- 7. See, for example, one of the most famous books of Shi'a theology, Kashfu 'l-Murad, the commentary (sharh) of 'Allamah al-Hilli on Muhaqqiq at-Tusi's Tajridu 'l-l'tiqadat, tr. Abu 'l-Hasan Sha'rani (Tehran: Islamiyya, n.d.) p. 516-518. In Usulu 'l-Fiqh, the term "an-nass" means a statement whose meaning is very clear and specific. In this sense, an-nass, by definition, cannot be implicit or ambiguous, and so it cannot be divided into jali and khafi.
- 8. Issued in late Ramadhan or early Shawwal 1418 on the internet.
- 9. For more on this event, see the chapter, "Self-Censorship in Muslim History" above.
- 10. See Nahju 'l-Balagha, sermon no. 5.
- 11. See Nahju I-Balagha, sermon no. 5.
- 12. See the quotation in the first part of this chapter.
- 13. Nahju 'l-Balagha, sermon # 74; see also at-Tabari in his Ta'rikh and Ibn al-Athir in his al-Kamil in the events of 23 AH; al-Azhari, Tahzibu 'l-Lugha, vol. 1 (Cairo edition) p. 341.
- 14. What I have written above cannot even be considered as a summary of the events of Saqifa and its aftermath. For details of the events in English, based on the earliest sources of Muslim history, see Rizvi, Imamate, pp. 113–126; al-'Askari, S. Murtaza, 'Abdu'l-lah ibn Saba' and Other Myths (Tehran: Wofis, 1984) pp. 69–95; Ja'fari, The Origin & Early Development, pp. 27–53.
- 15. For the conversation mentioned here, see Ibn Qutaybah ad–Dinwari, al–Imamah wa 's–Siyasah, part 1 (Cairo: al–Halabi Publications, n.d.) p. 20. Ibn Qutaybah's own words are as follows:

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فقالوا: "بايع." فقال: "إن انا لم افعل فمه؟" فقالوا: "اذًا والله الذى لا اله الا هو، نضرب عنقك!" فقال: "اذًا تقتلون عبد الله و اخا رسوله!" فقال عمر: "امًا عبد الله، فنعم. امًا اخو رسوله الله، فلا!" و ابو بكر ساكت لا يتكلم. فقال له عمر: "الا تامر فيه بامرك؟" ".فقال: " لا أكرهه على شيء ما كانت فاطمة الى جنبه
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16. Imam al-Bukhari has quoted this in two places in his Sahih, once in a brief form (without "except there is no prophet

after me") and then in full. See Sahih, vol. 5, Arabic with English translation by M. Mohsin Khan (Beirut: Dar al-'Arabiyya, n.d.) p. 47, 492-493.

- 17. Nahju 'l-Balagha, saying # 166.
- 18. This incident of Kufa has been narrated by four companions of the Prophet and fourteen of their disciples, and has been recorded in most books of history and tradition. See al-Amini, al-Ghadir, vol. 1 (Tehran: Mu'assatu 'l-Muwahidi, 1976) pp. 166–186. [Also see section on Reminders by Imam 'Ali [a] in Ghadir Khumm: Appointment of Imam 'Ali in the Qur'an, Hadith, History]

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