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Chapter 6: The Caliphate at a Crossroads: Ab Bakr and the Collusion of the Powerful Classes

The afternoon of the 28th of Safar of the year 11 A.H., which corresponds to May 25th of the year 632 A.D., is marked with indelible precision in Islemic history. With the flow of time, this event, and those which followed it, led to a radical political change in the socio-religious orientation of the Muslim world. It is the ill-fated day of the demise of the Prophet Muhammad, the date of the closing of the "Cycle of Prophethood" [delirat al-nubuwwah] and, simultaneously and successively, the opening of the "Cycle of Initiation" or the "Esoteric Cycle of the Imems" [delirat al-wileyah]. The passing away of the Prophet constitutes the most tragic moment in which two distinct conceptions of authority and power confront themselves.

The first was motivated by "eternal interests" and wanted to follow the straight path, shown by the final mandate of God and His Messenger, to its end. The second was embroiled in an intricate web of "personal interests," seeking social benefits and political privilege in which Isl®m, evidently, occupied a subaltern role. This later group represented the mentality of a segment of early Muslims who were unable to replace the ties of blood with the ties of faith.1

Historians explain that the death of the Prophet and the issue of his succession led to plots, intrigues, alliances, underground opposition, and corrupt forms of collusions. According to these academics, they were all provoked by the powerful representatives of the dominant class whose differences with 'Als were motivated by political ambition from the very beginning.

This interpretation, however, is far too simplistic when we consider the rivalry between the two factions, the emigrants [muh@jir@n] and the allies [ans@r].2The first, long accustomed to strong tribal authority, treaties, and blood–ties, wanted to maintain some of the political privileges and ancient social considerations abolished by Isl@m. They wanted to take advantage of the Prophet's death to reclaim power by appointing a Caliph who would be loyal to them: Ab® Bakr.

The appointment of 'Al® as successor, however, came from a divine mandate. Unlike the opportunistic

and orchestrated election of Ab® Bakr, 'Al®'s investiture was rooted in the historical event of Ghad®r. In the 11th year of the Hijrah, the Prophet made a solemn pilgrimage to Makkah, known as *Hajjat al-wad*®' [the Farewell Pilgrimage].3

During his return, he stopped on the 18th of *Dhul-Hijjah* at the pond of Ghad®r Khumm in front of 120,000 Muslims. Sh® ite commentators point to the event of Ghad®r as the definitive proof, not only of the fulfillment of the Prophet's mission, but of God's permanent commitment to the preservation of Isl®m by the concession of a *wil®yah* to His Final Messenger. 4The perfection and completion of Isl®m was conditioned and dependent on the designation of the Prophet's successor for, as we read in the Qur'®n [5:3], the Messenger and the guidance go hand and hand. As a result, both the Prophethood and the Im®mate must follow the same path.

Zayd ibn al-Arqam relates that "the first to visit and congratulate 'Al® were Ab® Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthm®n, Talhah, and Zubayr: the congratulations and the *bay'ah* [oaths of loyalty] continued until sunset.5What stands out from this and other trustworthy and authentic Sunn® traditions is that when the Prophet publicly appointed 'Al® as his successor and executor, placing his *wil®yah* in his descendants, neither Ab® Bakr nor 'Umar ibn al-Khatt®b, who ended up preceding 'Al® in the succession of the historical Caliphate, contested the matter nor did they have the audacity to claim any special rights. Ab® Bakr never insisted upon his superiority over 'Al®.

He never claimed to have more right to rule over the Muslims and for them to obey him. To be precise, the event that unleashed an endless series of internal division, known by Arab historians as the *fitnah* [insubordination / sedition], came quite unexpectedly. It coincides with Ab® Bakr, the son of Ab® Quh®fah, being illegitimately appointed as the successor of the Prophet. His appointment took place through the collusion of powerful interests. It was they who granted him the leadership of the Isl®mic community by means of a pre–Isl®mic consultative assembly [*sh*®*r*®].6

When commenting on this practice, Modernist Sunn® scholars commonly claim that Ab® Bakr was recognized as Caliph through a "democratic" election, based on the decision and consensus of a majority. 7This gives the false impression that this ancient form of consultation is comparable to the modern democratic systems found in the Western world. It must be recalled, though, that the people did not participate in this elective act in the political sense that we understand it today. Quite the opposite was true.

The people were completely excluded from the process, including 'Al®, his Family and the closest Companions of the Prophet.8The *sh®rah* [a fundamental organism of the pre–Isl®mic constitutional system] that was convoked in the *saq®fah* was limited to the council of tribal chiefs exclusively composed of the dominant classes who were open and organized enemies of 'Al®.9

As a result of these events, the Islsmic Caliphate, the first *de facto* Islsmic government, the highest and most important religious and political institution in the Sunns world, begins when Abs Bakr decides to

take personal power. As Caliph, Ab® Bakr assumes the role of leading and governing the rest of Muslims in accord with a sovereign authority and jurisdiction which, until the time of the Prophet's death, was expressed in his culmination of the Prophethood. While the Prophet lived, the Caliphate was, in the person of Muhammad, a holy and indivisible entity.

After his death, though, ambitions became impatient. The result was the rupture of what, by divine design, was inseparable, the Prophethood and the *wil* yah, the Caliphate and the Im ate, which were meant to go hand in hand, since there can never be one without the other. 10 It was for this reason that the Prophet said in the Tradition of Ghad r, "to whomsoever I was the lord and master AI is your lord and master." 11

The initiatory role and function of the Caliphate and the Immate are the same. They are characteristic of the spiritual authority and the temporal power of the Imm. They are non-transferable and cannot be subjected to the ballot box. When we say that the functions of the Imm are "non-transferable" we specifically mean that these powers and functions are not at the reach of unqualified individuals. Spiritual and political leadership is not available to all.

They cannot be seized by force or by consensus. The powers in question are exclusive. They are superior by their very nature. They are divine by origin and not by artifice. The Im®mate requires an individual with exceptional perfection and cannot be shared with all individuals.

Ab® Bakr's attitude and actions forever destroyed the esoteric foundation of the succession of the Prophet. Concerned more with justifying his own personal superiority, he constantly stressed that consensus was indispensable when it came to continuing the exoteric work of the Prophet. This is the reason why, according to some later Sunn® commentaries, it is often asserted that Ab® Bakr was selected Caliph because the Prophet had not clearly designated a successor. The truth, however, is altogether different.

Although some Sunn® scholars admit that the most important traditional sources contain numerous testimonies that manifest, with great clarity, the legitimate rights of succession of 'Al®, they insist, nonetheless, that the Prophet may very well have changed his mind at the last minute and finally decided to place Ab® Bakr in the place of 'Al®. 12

We must remember that, according to the clearest and most unanimous accounts, there is no indication whatsoever that the Prophet changed his mind regarding 'Als or did anything to retract his previous decision, annulling, canceling, or removing his primary rank as a member of the Prophetic Household. If he had changed his mind, he would have made it known publicly in front of all Muslims with the same clarity and precision that he had used previously to proclaim 'Als as the head of the community at Ghader Khumm.

It was well-known by all Muslims of the time that the Prophet never acted out of haste. His decisions were well meditated upon. What certain Sunn® commentators seem to forget, or fail to take into

consideration, is the consequence of the ultimate mandate of God to His Messenger in the moment that the following **y!** was revealed: "And today I have perfected your religion and have chosen Isl**!** as your religion." [4:3].

While some Sunn® commentators defend the superiority of Ab® Bakr due to the respect he received from some of the Prophet's Companions, there are numerous clear accounts concerning the superiority of 'Al®. Any educated individual, who objectively examines the circumstances surrounding the death of the Prophet, can only conclude that 'Al® was the victim of a political plot. He was the victim of a conspiracy aimed at denying him the legitimate exercise of his political functions as Spiritual Magistrate as Caliph and Im®m. In this light, is it not significant that Ab® Bakr changed the name of his post, calling himself "Caliph"—in the sense of "substitute" and not "successor"—as opposed to Im®m?13

On the basis of the aforementioned, we cannot come to a favorable conclusion to support the superiority of Ab® Bakr. If we stick objectively to the reports found in traditional primary sources, we must address the metaphysical and esoteric reasons for 'Al®'s appointment as the successor of the Prophet. It was at Ghad®r Khumm were Muhammad transmitted his *wil®yah* [guardianship] as an exoteric personification of temporal power and a representation of the esoteric unity and universality of the spiritual authority.

Certain Orientalists, who focus exclusively on superficial interpretations, may indeed admit the superiority of 'Als. However, they view the whole question as a political dispute among two factions struggling for the succession of the Prophet which resulted in the victory of Abs Bakr. Similarly, when studying the prophetic traditions, many Sunns commentators deny or fail to recognize the status of 'Als and his Imsmate as a continuation of the personal primacy of the Prophet.

The same selective blindness regarding the status of 'Al\(\text{\text{N}}\), however, does not occur among S\(\text{\text{\text{s}}}\) is ages. In S\(\text{\text{\text{s}}}\) fism, one aspect does not exclude the other. As a result, both exoterically and esoterically, Ab\(\text{\text{\text{B}}}\) Bakr and 'Al\(\text{\text{s}}\) ibn Ab\(\text{\text{\text{T}}}\) T\(\text{\text{lib}}\) can be seen as the ark\(\text{\text{\text{N}}}\) or pillars of Isl\(\text{\text{m}}\). For S\(\text{\text{\text{f}}}\) fism, 'Al\(\text{\text{\text{s}}}\), as founder of the founder of the wil\(\text{\text{\text{\text{S}}}\) partial [guardianship], legatee and living preserver, present at all times, continues to be the spiritual foundation of Isl\(\text{\text{mic}}\) gnosis due to his innate dignity and power as qutb al-aqt\(\text{\text{\text{\text{D}}}\) [the Pole of the Spiritual Poles].

Ab® Bakr, on the other hand, is the visible foundation of the religion due to the powers that were conferred upon him through the consensus of the Companions. For S®fism, they both fulfill this function simultaneously: both Ab® Bakr and 'Al® ibn Ab® T®lib are the pillars of the religion in its external and formal manifestations. The interesting thing, however, is that for the S®fis, the First Im®m of the Sh®'ites is the Pillar of all Pillars, even of Ab® Bakr, in the sense that upon the death of the Prophet he assumed all of his functions and prerogatives.

Sefism, as is well-known, contains formulations that are more esoteric than exoteric. It should not be overlooked that the very establishment of Sefism in the Sunne world is the result of the unbalancing action caused by Abe Bakr when he split the exoteric from the esoteric by assuming the leadership of

the Muslim community.

Even though Stism and Shism are entirely orthodox expressions of Islism, Sunnis have always viewed them with extreme suspicion due to their constant reference to 'Alt as *al-bib* or "the gate" to Muhammadan gnosis and initiation. According to the exoteric exegesis of some Sunnis scholars, the Prophet is also a Legislator, since in Islism the sacred law permeates all aspects of religious and social life. For Sunnis scholars, the Caliph or Imism is the Successor of the Prophet, but only as a partial executor of the Law as given and is in no way a spiritual successor of the Prophet.

Sunn theologians justify the historical need for the Caliphate, as an institution, from the point of view that one of the objectives of the Prophet was the creation of a strong organized Isl mic State. For Sunnis, the Im or Caliph must possess the following qualities: belong to the tribe of Quraysh [the tribe to which Muhammad belonged], be competent and capable, possess knowledge and virtue; be worthy of ruling men and guide them along the straight moral and religious path through the rigorous application of the formal divine laws. He may be named directly by the Prophet or the preceding Caliph or by means of "election," namely, through designation by the elders of the community.

- 1.] Editor's Note: This shows that things are not much different today among many Muslims, where ties of blood, clan, and tribe, takes precedence over Islem.
- 2. Editor's Note: Having been rivals with the Hashimites, the Prophet's clan, for two generations, the Ummayads could not accept the supremacy God had given to the Hashimites by sending his Messenger from within his tribe. As Ja'fariyan explains:

There is indisputable evidence provided by older and recent research that there existed two distinct factions during the era of the Messenger of God. The first consisted of the Quraysh who were not on good terms with the Ban® H®shim even before the advent of Isl®m. The second faction was that of the supporters of 'Al® consisting of the H®shimis and their supporters from among the Muh®jir®n and the Ans®r, such as Ab® Dharr, 'Amm®r, Miqd®d and Salm®n. Al-F®rs® concedes the existence of these two factions before the episode of [the] saq®fah. The extent of their political differences, which had religious roots from the very beginning, increased with time.

For instance, some of the Companions from the very early days did not recognize a role for the Prophet's sunnah by the side of the Qur's. This belief was the important characteristic of the Qurayshi faction. Denial of the religious authority of the Prophet's prescriptions and prohibition on the writing and narration of hadsth are clearly visible elements in the stance of the leaders of this faction right from the Prophet's days. Without doubt one can say that the Companions of the Prophet formed two different groups from this angle: those who believed in the necessity of following the Prophet in all aspects and those who did not consider it obligatory to follow the Prophet in matters relating to government and political affairs. The pre-Islsmic influence of the Quraysh, along with other factors, led the latter group to acquire power.

- Jafr further confirms that although "Muhammad's progressive Is mic action had succeeded in suppressing Arab conservatism, embodied in heathen pre-Is mic practices and ways of thinking... in less than thirty years' time this Arab conservatism revitalized itself as a forceful reaction to challenge Muhammad's action once again" (202).
- 3. Editor's Note: The tradition of Ghad®r Khumm is mutaw®tir [continuous]. In other words, it is a tradition that has been accepted by Muslims generation after generation down from the time of the Prophet and has been reported by such a large number of authentic chains of narration that it is impossible that they should have agreed on a falsehood. Its authority is thus unquestionable and can be accepted as a historical fact. There is a difference of opinion as to the number of parrators needed for a tradition to be considered mutaw®tir. Some consider four to be the minimum required:

number of narrators needed for a tradition to be considered mutaw®tir. Some consider four to be the minimum required; others five, seven or ten. And yet others raise it further to forty or even seventy. In the case of the tradition of Ghad®r Khumm, it meets the most stringent requirements, having been narrated by hundreds of reporters from all schools of thought.

- 4. Editor's Note: For a detailed discussion of the event of Ghader, consult 'Abd al-Husayn Ahmad al-Amene's 11 volume encyclopedic work al-Ghader feal-kiteb wa al-sunnah.
- 5. Editor's Note: All of whom broke their oath to All®h, the Prophet and 'All. If the tradition "Everyone rejected Isl®m after the death of the Prophet except three: al-Miqd®d ibn Aswad, Ab® Dharr al-Ghif®r® and Salm®n al-F®ris®" (Kulayn®) refers to kufr millah, the state of a person who is a not a true Muslim yet adheres to the external trappings of Isl®m, then it is partially correct; otherwise, if it refers to kufr riddah, unbelief as a result of apostasy, it is an overgeneralization and must be rejected. In any event, the Messenger of All®h warned Im®m 'Al® that "The community will betray you after me" (Muf®d 210).
- 6. Author's Note: Shere is a pre-Islemic custom in which elections and votes alternate giving place to a succession of consultative councils. These consultative councils became increasingly narrow until they reached the tribal leader, the living executive chief. The only thing that limited his exercise of absolutist power was the enormous coercion to which he was subjected. Although shere was the method in which pre-Islemic

Arabic tribes selected leaders and made major decisions, some of the Companions pointed to the following Qur'snic verses as an endorsement for its use in selecting the Caliph: "So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them and consult with them [the believers] upon the conduct of affairs" (3:159) and "those who conduct their affairs by counsel [are praised]" (43:38). According to Shelite scholars these verses do not refer to the appointment of the Caliph or the Imem, something which was divinely decreed.

7. Editor's Note: The Sunn often say that in the Islemic system of shere, heads are not simply counted, they are weighed. Hence, they endorse this oligarchic "democracy" of the elite. As Jafre notes,

Ab® Bakr's succession was realized neither through a free election in any sense of the term nor through a free choice of the community. It was simply a decision by a particular group of muh®jir®n which was hastily forced or thrust upon others. Its success was due only to the delicate existing group conflicts in Mad®nah. This is obvious from 'Umar's own statement...that 'Admittedly it was a hasty affair but God averted the evil of it.' (49).

The same applies for 'Umar's appointment. As Jafr explains,

'Umar's nomination...was neither based on the method of consultation with the elite of the people, nor was the opinion of the community in general sought before the choice was made. It was simply Ab® Bakr's own personal and arbitrary decision, which he wanted to be endorsed by only those of the Companions whom he considered most important from a clannish point of view. (64).

- 8. Editor's Note: Those who were excluded from the saq®fah included 'Al®, al-'Abb®s, most of Ban® H®shim, Us®mah b. Zayd, al-Zubayr, Salm®n al-F®ris®, Ab® Dharr al-Ghif®r®, al-Miqd®d ibn al-Aswad, 'Amm®r b. Y®sir, Hudhayfah b. al-Yam®m, Khuzaymah b. Th®bit, Ab® Burayd al-Aslam®, al-Bur® b. 'Azib, Ab® Ka'b, Sahl ibn Han®f, Sa'ad b. 'Ub®d®h, Qays b. Sa'd, Ab® Ayy®b al-Ans®r®, J®bir ibn Sa'd, Kh®lid b. Sa'd, and many others. See, Muhammad al-T®j®n®, Then I was Guided, 2nd ed. (Bayr®t: N.P, 1990): 164, referring to T®r®kh al-Tabar®, T®r®kh ibn al-Ath®r, T®r®kh al-khulaf®' by Ibn Qutaybah, and T®r®kh al-Kham®s. The term saq®fah refers to the roofed building used for meetings by the tribe of Sa'ida, of the faction of the Khazraj, of the city of Mad®nah.
- 9. The testimonies that attest to the opposition and collusion of Ab® Bakr's followers can be seen in Ibn Hanbal, IV, 281; Ibn Ab® al-Had®d, VI, 42; Ibn Qutaybah, I, 18; Bukh®r® IV, 127; Ibn 'As®kir, al-T®r®kh al-kab®r (Damascus n.d.) II, 50; 'Al® al-Muttaq®, Kanz al'-umm®l (Hyderabad 1364/1944–45) VI 397. Mu®wiyyah's response to Muhammad ibn Ab® Bakr (who was one of the faithful and unconditional followers of 'Al® is interesting in that he explicitly recognized that his mandate as well as Ab® Bakr's primacy were the result of a plot and conspiracy of the oligarchic sectors against the First Im®m's rights of succession.

See, 'All ibn al-Husayn al-Mas'ed Murej al-dhahab wa ma'edin al-jawehir (Bayret 1966), II; the version of 'Ale ibn Abe Telib regarding these episodes is found in the famous Khutbat al-shiqhshiqiyyah, found in Nahj al-baleghah, ibid, khutbah III, 59-61; Ibn al-Haded, I, 34; concerning what was discussed between 'Umar ibn al-Khatteb and the members of the shere during the reunion in the saqefah, see Abe Ja'far al-Tabare, Terekh al-Rusul wa'l mulek, ed. M.J. de Goeje et alter (Leiden 1879-1901), I, 1837-1845; 1683; 1827; 2779; al-Baledhure, I, 588; V. 19-21; 33; 49. It is impossible to summarize in a few titles the vast repertoire of sources referring to the saqefah. We have found it useful to list some of the principle sources and, some of the easily accessible English sources. See, Ibn Abe al-Haded, Sharh Nahj al-baleghah, ed. M. Abe

al-Fadl Ibrehem (Bayret 1965), II, 20-25; 44-60; III 275; Jalel al-Den Suyute, Terekh al-khulafel, ed. A. al-Hamed (Cairo 1964); 61-72; al-Baledhure, Anseb al-ashref, ed., by M. Hamidulleh (Cairo 1955), I, 579-591; Ibn Qutaybah, Terekh al-khulafel (Cairo 1964), I, 18: 61-72; Ibn Kazer, al-Bideyah wa al-niheyah (Cairo 1932) V, 212; A. Ibn Hanbal, al-Musnad (Cairo 1895) IV, 136, 164, 172, 281; cfr. Also S.H.M. Jafre The Origins and Development of Shelah Islem (Qum 1989, II, 27-57); M.R. al-Mudharar, The 'Saqefah' (Tehran 1993), passim; D.M. Donaldson, The Shelite Religion (London 1933); Muhammad Husayn Tabetabele, o.c., I, 39-50.

Editor's Note: As Jafr® explains, "The material preserved in the sources also strongly suggests that Ab® Bakr and 'Umar had formed an alliance long before" (49).

- 10. Editor's Note: Regardless of the qualities he may have possessed, Ab Bakr's action cannot be taken lightly. He disobeyed All hand His Messenger, undermined a divine design and usurped temporal authority. The result was a rupture between the spiritual and worldly realms of catastrophic consequences.
- 11. Editor's Note: As Jafr notes,

As far as the authenticity of the event itself is concerned, it has hardly ever been denied or questioned even by the most conservative Sunn® authorities, who have themselves recorded it. Most noteworthy among them are Im®m Ahmad b. Hanbal in his Musnad, Tirmidh®, Nas®®, Ibn M®jah, Ab® D®w®d and almost all other sunan writers, Ibn al-Ath®r in his Us®d al-gh®bah, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr in his Ist®®b, followed by all other writers of biographical works and even Ibn 'Abd Rabbih in his 'Iqd al-far®d and J®hiz in his 'Uthm®niyyah. The traditions of Ghad®r are so abundantly reported and commonly attested by hundreds of transmitters belonging to all schools of thought that it would be futile to doubt their authenticity.

Ibn Kather, a most staunch supporter of the Sunne viewpoint, has devoted seven pages to this subject and has collected a great number of different isneds from which the tradition is narrated. It is also Ibn Kather who informs us that the famous historian al-Tabare, in a two-volume unfinished work entitled Kiteb al-fade il...wrote in full details of the Prophet's discourse in favor of 'Ale at Ghader Khumm. A modern scholar, Husayn 'Ale Mahfez, in his penetrating researches on the subject of Ghader Khumm, has recorded with documentation that this tradition has been narrated by at least 110 Companions, 84 tebien, 355 'ulame', 25 historians, 27 traditionists, 11 exegesists, 18 theologians, and 5 philologists. Most of them were later counted by the Sunnis as among their own number. (19–20)

The Event of Ghad Tkhumm in the Qur n, Had th and History compiled by the Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project cites 76 companions, 69 successors, and 626 scholars in the chains of transmission, recorded in 182 Sunn books. In addition, it provides Arabic text for 387 narrations, English translation for 78 narrations, scanned pages from 54 books and 280 quotations on the reliability of narrators in Arabic and 324 in English.

- 12. Editor's Note: Such a volte-face from the Prophet is not plausible. This is the man who taught that "Haste is from Satan" (Imem Mazhare Tafser Mazhare, Ibn Hayyen al-Bahr al-muhet).
- 13. Editor's Note: The concept and foundation of the Caliphate was erroneous and, after the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs, soon degenerated into debauchery. As for Yaz d,

[He] was the first among the Caliphs to drink wine in public...he sought the worst company, spending much of his time in the pleasures of music and singing and amusing himself with apes and dogs. He himself had no use for religion, nor had he any regard for the religious sentiments of others. Addicted to wine-bibbing, attracted to singing-girls, and exposed to all sorts of vices, Yaz®d has never been presented in good terms by any Muslim writer of nay period or by any school of thought. (Jafr® 174)

The Immate, however, remained pure and pristine, lead by the most God-fearing leading scholars and spiritual authorities of the age, the Imms from Ahlul Bayt.

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