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the twelfth Holy Imam of the Twelvers

Following the 'Right' Imam

Importance of following the 'Right' chain

First of all, we all accept that we are the slaves (Ibaad) of Allah (swt). As Muslims, we must submit and obey Him, as He is our Master. We know that as Muslims, we must believe in all of the Prophets and all of the books that were sent by Allah (swt) in order to be Muslims. If one believes in **some** Prophets only, then he is not a Muslim. For example if one does not believe in Yusuf (as) or Nuh (as), then he is not a Muslim. In other words, we must believe in **all** the Prophets in order to be a Muslim, whether we know all of their names or not. In Quran, only a few names of the prophets are mentioned.

The Holy Quran informs us only about some of the Prophets.

Quran clearly says in Surah Ghafir verse 78:

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلًا مِّن قَبْلِكَ مِنْهُمْ مَّن قَصَصْنَا عَلَيْكَ وَمِنْهُمْ مَّن لَّمْ نَقْصُصْ عَلَيْكَ

“Certainly We have sent apostles before you. Of them are those We have recounted to you and of them are those We have not recounted to you....”¹

In order to be a Muslim, one must believe in all the prophets, the whole chain of prophets; **one cannot pick and choose and only believe in some.**

As Muslims, we believe that the last messenger of Allah (swt) was our Holy Prophet (sawa) and there are not going to be any more prophets after him. Does this mean that there is no divine guidance after the Holy prophet (sawa)?

After the Holy Prophet (sawa) what?

As Muslims, we believe that Allah (swt) has never left humanity without a divinely appointed guide as His

representative on earth.

Holy Quran, Surah Ra'ad verse 7 says,

وَلِكُلِّ قَوْمٍ هَادٍ ۗ۷

There is a guide for every nation.[2](#)

Who is the guide after the demise of the last messenger of Allah (swt)?

The Shias believe that an Imam is the guide after the demise of the Holy Prophet (sawa). As per the belief of the Ithna Ashari Shias (The Twelvers), the Holy Imams, the successors of the Holy Prophet (sawa), are divinely appointed and are infallible. Shias believe that Imamate is one of the Usool e Deen[3](#); it is an essential part of the religion.

Imamate, as per the Twelvers, has all the characteristics of prophethood, except that the Imams do not bring any changes in the religion. They preserve the religion that was brought by the Holy Prophet (sawa), and they need to be obeyed at the same level as we obey the Holy Prophet (sawa).

The Holy Quran Surah Nisa verse 59 says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ

“O you who have faith! Obey Allah and Obey the Apostle and those vested with authority among you”.[4](#)

This verse obliges the Muslims to obey three entities: First, to obey Allah; second, to obey Messenger **and** those vested with authority (Ulil-Amr). The arrangement of the words shows that the obedience of Ulil-Amr is as much obligatory as is the obedience of the Messenger because Quran uses just one verb for both of them without repeating the verb again. Naturally, it means that Ulil-Amr should be of the same importance as the Messenger in terms of obedience to them; otherwise, Allah would not have joined them together in this verse under one verb.

It is interesting to note that Allah (swt) uses a separate verb for Himself before mentioning the Messenger and Ulil-Amr, which shows that Allah has higher authority than that of the Messenger and Ulil-Amr. It is also clear from the above verse that Ulil-Amr does not mean messengers, Ulil-Amr and the Messengers are not the same. Otherwise, Allah would only have said: “Obey Allah, and Obey Messenger only.” But He added Ulil-Amr (those who are given authority by Allah). This is one of the places where the concept of Imamate and the necessity of obedience to them come from.[5](#)

The brothers of Ahle Sunna (the Sunnis) translate this word Ulil-Amr as rulers because the rulers have

authority over their subjects. But this translation makes the ruler come and stand on the same platform as of the Holy Prophet (sawa), because as per Arabic grammar, the ayah uses one verb for the Prophet and Ulil-Amr. This cannot be possible because the rulers tend to sin and oppress. The Holy Prophet (sawa) never sinned, and the Ulil-Amr (the ones vested with authority) also cannot sin. Why? Simply because if Allah wants us to follow and obey someone, then He cannot obviously order us to obey sinners. So, as per the Shia belief, the word Ulil-Amr in this ayah is referring to the infallible/sinless Imams.

As per the ayah Surah Nisa ayah 59, it is the command of Allah (swt) to obey Him and obey the Holy Prophet (sawa) and the Ulil-Amr (those vested with authority). Shias say that the Ulil-Amr are the infallible Imams.

[Need to follow all the 'Rightful Imams'](#)

There is a famous Hadith of the Prophet (sawa) “Whoever dies without knowing his Imam dies a death of ignorance”.⁶ Imam al-Baqir (as) also said something similar, the gist of what he said; whoever dies without having an Imam dies a death of a nonbeliever and a hypocrite.⁷

Now, since we believe in the concept of Imamate, we need to follow the right chain of Imams, the ones that are divinely appointed by Allah (swt)... Otherwise, if we follow any leader /guide without doing any research, we will end up going astray.

One might say, “I believe in Imamate. To me, it does not matter if the imams were 12 or 21 or 49, as long as I am a good person and I pray five times a day, etc...” This is wrong! Why? This is because we need to believe and have faith in the right chain of all the prophets and the imams. This is a very serious condition! For instance, if a person says, “*We believe in prophethood, but we do not follow the prophets after Prophet Moses (as), it is the same thing, and it does not matter.*” This person is not a believer then, as he refuses to accept the Prophets after Prophet Moses (as).

Now, if a Muslim says, “I believe in all the prophets; I believe in Allah (swt), and that He is one, I believe in the last messenger, Holy Prophet Muhammad (sawa), and I believe in Quran. That is all I need, and I do not care about the other disputed issues.” Will this justification carry any weight on the Day of Judgment?

Satan worshipped Allah (swt) for thousands of years, and disobeyed Allah (swt) only once by saying that he will not prostrate to Adam (as). Just because of one act of disobedience, he was thrown out of the kingdom of mercy. So the ones who claim that prayers are enough, should know that Satan worshipped Allah (swt) so much that Allah moved him up, brought him and placed him above the ranks of Angels. Then after all of that worship, just because of one act of disobedience, he was thrown out of the kingdom of mercy. We should not forget that we are the slaves of Allah. **We need to obey and worship Him the way HE wants us to, not the way we like.** A slave should submit totally. Allah (swt), in Surah Nisa

Ayah 59, is clearly ordering us to obey Allah and obey the Apostle and those vested with authority ...

Going back to our discussion, In order to be Momins (True faithful believers), we need to believe and follow the **whole chain** of the Imams. Like in the case of the Prophets, we also must believe and follow all the rightful Imams. The question that arises now is, how many Imams? Who are the rightful Imams? Who are the Imams who are vested with authority?

Who are the rightful Imams?

Let us look into Imams: let us see if there are any ahadith (traditions of the Prophet) regarding the number of Imams who will succeed the prophets.

A number of ahadith (traditions) are found in the books of Shias, and surprisingly enough in the books of Sunni brothers too, that say that the Holy Prophet (sawa) had said that there would be twelve Khulafa (Successors) after him. This hadith matches the belief of the Ithna Ashari Shias, but does not match the belief of the Sunni brothers. Yet, at least a few ahadith of this kind are found in the books of Sunni brothers.

Not a single hadith is found where the Holy Prophet (sawa) ever said that he will have 21 Imams after him, or 49 Imams after him! This is a challenge if one can find one authentic hadith regarding 21 Imams (Bohra belief) or 49 Imams (Agha Khani belief).

Since the Shia books will, of course, have the twelve Imams mentioned, allow me to quote a couple of ahadith from the books of Sunni brothers:

Narrated Jabir Ibn Samura: *I heard the Prophet saying,*

“There will be twelve commanders (Amir).” He then said a sentence which I did not hear. My father said, the Prophet added, “All of them will be from Quraish.”^{[8](#)}

The Prophet (sawa) said:

“There shall be twelve Caliphs for this community, all of them from Quraish.”^{[9](#)}

Narrated Jabir Ibn Samura: *The Prophet (sawa) said:*

“The matter (life) will not end, until it is passed by twelve Caliphs.” He then whispered a sentence. I asked my father what the Prophet said. He said, the Prophet added: “All of them will be from Quraish.”^{[10](#)}

The above traditions that I quoted are from the books that are deemed as very authentic by the Sunni brothers, especially ‘Sahih al-Muslim’ and ‘Sahih al-Bukhari’, which are considered to be the most authentic after the Holy Quran by the brothers of Ahle Sunna.

We have traditions where the Prophet (sawa) indicates the names of his 12 successors, one after another – they match the Ithna Ashari (The Twelvers) Shia belief. However, I think that these three traditions above are sufficient to prove my point.

Who are the ‘Twelve Caliphs’?

Now a question arises, who are the 12 caliphs/leaders/imams?

Obviously, the above traditions do not fit the first four Caliphs (as per the belief of Sunni brothers), since they were less than twelve. The belief of our Sunni brothers does not match with the hadith of our Holy Prophet (sawa).

And the Umayyad Caliphs were more than twelve and almost all of them were oppressors, so they cannot be applied to them. Also, they cannot be applied to the Abbasid Caliphs, because they were more than twelve; they were tyrants too; and they persecuted the descendants of the Prophet everywhere, meaning that they did not comply with the Quranic verse: “I don’t ask you any wage except to love my family.”¹¹

The ahadith (traditions) about twelve successors that we talked about earlier are found in the books that are claimed by the Sunni brothers as the most authentic books after the Holy Quran. The ahadith clearly state that there will be 12 successors of the Holy Prophet (sawa) and the scholars of Ahle Sunna do consider these traditions authentic. This is why they tried their level best to come up with the number twelve, but unfortunately, they all differed in their opinion.

As per Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (Great Sunni Scholar):

There are only twelve Caliphs until the Day of Judgement. And they will continue to act on truth, even if they are not continuous.

We see that from the twelve, four are the Righteous Caliphs, then Hasan, then Muawiyah, then Ibn Zubayr, and finally ‘Umar bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz. They are eight. Four of them remain. **Maybe Mahdi**, the Abbasid could be included as he is an Abbasid like ‘Umar bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz was an Umayyad, and Tahir ‘Abbasi will also be included because he was a just ruler. **Thus two more are yet to come. One of them is Mahdi, because he is from the AhlulBayt (as).**¹²

As per Ibn al-Jawzi (Sunni Scholar):

The first Caliph of Bani Umayya was Yazid ibn Mu’awiyah and the last, Marwan al-Himar. Their total is thirteen. ‘Uthman, Mu’awiyah and ibn Zubayr are not included as they were among the Companions of the Holy Prophet (s).

If we exclude Marwan bin al-Hakam because of the controversy about his being a Companion, or that

he was in power, even though Abdullah ibn Zubayr had the support of the people. **Then we can get the figure of Twelve.** ... [13](#)

As per Al-Bayhaqi another Sunni scholar:

This number (twelve) is found till the period of Walid ibn ‘Abd al-Malik. After this, there was chaos and disturbance. Then came the Abbasid dynasty. This report has increased the number of Imams. If we neglect some of their characteristics which came after the disturbance, then their number will be much higher.” [14](#)

As per Ibn Kathir another Sunni scholar:

Whosoever follows Bayhaqi and agrees with his assertion that Jama’ah means those Caliphs who came intermittently till the time of **Walid ibn Yazid ibn ‘Abd al-Malik, the transgressor** comes under the purview of the tradition quoted by us criticising and denouncing such people.

And if we accept the Caliphate of Ibn Zubayr before ‘Abd al-Malik, **the total shall be sixteen**, whereas their total should be twelve before ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz. **In this method, Yazid ibn Mu’awiyah will be included, and not ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz.** However, it is established that the majority of the ‘ulama accept ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz as a truthful and a just Caliph. [15](#)

It could be concluded that the Sunni scholars did take seriously the traditions of the Holy Prophet (sawa) regarding him having twelve successors after him. This is why they tried their level best to come up with twelve successors. The traditions regarding twelve successors are found in the books of Ithna Ashari Shias too, and they match with their belief of twelve Imams. **When one looks into the lives of the twelve Imams that the Ithna Ashari Shias (Twelvers) follow, they have led impeccable lives** and their traditions are full of wisdom. They were all martyred, except the last Imam, Imam Mahdi (atfs), who went into occultation.

Imam al-Mahdi (atfs) the twelfth Holy Imam of the Twelvers

Regarding al-Mahdi, the twelfth Imam of the Ithna Ashari Shias, there are many traditions that are found in Shia books and in the books of Ahle Sunna. Some of them are as follows:

The Prophet (sawa) said:

“Al-Mahdi is one of us, the members of the household (Ahlul-Bayt).” [16](#)

It is evident from the above tradition that Imam al-Mahdi (as) is from the Ahlul-Bayt of Prophet Muhammad. The following tradition clearly mentions that Imam al-Mahdi is one of descendants of the daughter of Prophet Muhammad (sawa):

The Prophet (sawa) said:

The Mahdi will be of my family, of the descendants of Fatimah (the Holy Prophet's daughter). [17](#)

Another hadith:

The Prophet (sawa) said:

“Even if the entire duration of the world's existence has already been exhausted and only one day is left (before the day of judgment), Allah will expand that day to such a length of time, as to accommodate the kingdom of a person from my Ahlul-Bayt, who will be called by my name. [18](#) He will fill out the earth with peace and justice as it will have been full of injustice and tyranny (by then).”[19](#)

Another Hadith:

The Messenger of Allah (sawa) said to Ali (as):

“An issue will be born to you whom I have gifted him with my name and my nickname.”[20](#)

Look at all these references where these ahadith /traditions are found. There are more, but I think this is sufficient to make my point.

The interesting thing is that these ahadith are found in the well-known books of our Sunni brothers. They do not believe in Imamate, and yet, they believe that Imam Mahdi (as) will come. I would like to pose this question to the brothers of Ahle Sunna: “If you believe that Quran and Hadith are enough, and you do not need an Imam after the Holy Prophet (sawa), then why are you too waiting for Imam Mahdi (as)?” Then, I would like to add, ‘Your books have all kinds of ahadith regarding Imam Mahdi (as), so you cannot deny this fact’.

Some people find it hard to believe how Imam Mahdi (as) can still be alive. How can a person live for so long? They find this concept unbelievable. Well, it is possible if Allah wishes. There are many incredible stories in Quran, which of course are all true and we are obliged to believe in them. For example: Quran states that Prophet Noah (as) preached for 950 years (Just imagine how many years he might have lived, as per ahadith he lived 2500 years!).[21](#) Quran speaks about the people of the cave – they slept in the cave for 309 years! [22](#) Prophet Jesus (as) spoke when he was a baby[23](#), as per Quran. Furthermore, we have the story of Prophet Uzair[24](#) who was dead for 100 years and then was brought back to life. He also saw his donkey come back to life again, all by the leave of Allah (swt).[25](#) Prophet Jesus (as) is still alive[26](#) and is more than 2000 years old, and will come back. There are many more stories that are incredible in Quran that we believe in. If Allah (swt) wishes, then anything is possible, hence, one should not doubt about the long life of Imam Mahdi (atfs).

As per the traditions, it could further be proven that the Ithna Ashari Imams are the rightful chain of Imams. All the traditions found in the books of Ahle Sunna and the Shia books say that the Holy Prophet (sawa) will have twelve successors. As discussed earlier, the Agha Khani Ismaili Imams are 49 and the Bohra Ismaili Imams are 21 therefore these numbers do not match the traditions of the Holy Prophet

(sawa).

- [1.](#) Surah Ghafir (40), Ayah 78
- [2.](#) Surah Ra'ad (13), Ayah 7
- [3.](#) Roots of religion
- [4.](#) Surah Nisa (4), Ayah 59
- [5.](#) The status of the Holy Prophet (sawa) was much higher than our Imams, the rightful successors to him. Please do not misunderstand me, as far as obedience to them is concerned, we are required to obey them equally, as per the ayah
- [6.](#) Al-Hilali, Sulaym ibn Qays Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays Al-Hilali, vol. 2, p. 932, H. 71
- [7.](#) Al-Kafi, vol. 1, p. 183, H. 8
- [8.](#) Sahih al-Bukhari Hadith: 9.329 (Arabic-English version)
- [9.](#) Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, vol. 5, p. 106
- [10.](#) Sahih Muslim, Arabic version, Kitab al-Imaara, 1980 Edition Pub. In Saudi Arabia, vol. 3, p. 1452, Tradition #5. Sahih Muslim, English version, Chapter DCCLIV (titled: The People are subservient to the Quraish and the Caliphate is the Right of the Quraish), vol. 3, p. 1009, Tradition #4477
- [11.](#) Surah Shura (42), Ayah 23
- [12.](#) Al-Suyuti, Tarikh al-Khulafa, p. 12
- [13.](#) Ibn al-Jawzi, Kashf al-Mushkil, as quoted in Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Fath al-Bari 16:340 from Sibt Ibn al-Jawzi
- [14.](#) Ibn Kathir, Ta'rikh, 6:249; Al-Suyuti, Tarikh al-Khulafa, p. 11
- [15.](#) Ibn Kathir, Ta'rikh, 6:249-250
- [16.](#) Sunan Ibn Majah, vol. 2, Tradition #4085
- [17.](#) Sunan Abu Dawud, English version, Ch. 36, Tradition #4271 (narrated by Umm Salama, the wife of the Prophet); Sunan Ibn Majah, vol. 2, Tradition #4086; al-Nisa'i and al-Bayhaqi; al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar al-Haythami, Ch. 11, section 1, p. 249
- [18.](#) The actual name of the twelfth Imam is Muhammed his title is Al Mahdi, Al Qaim.
- [19.](#) Sahih al-Tirmidhi, vol. 2, p. 86, vol. 9, pp. 74-75; Sunan Abu Dawud, vol. 2, p. 7; Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, pp. 84,376; vol. 3, p. 63; al-Mustadrak ala al-Sahihayn, by al-Hakim, vol. 4, p. 557; Jami' al-Saghir, by al-Suyuti, pp. 2, 160; al-Arful Wardi, by al-Suyuti, p. 2; al-Majma', by al-Tabarani, p. 217; Tahzeeb al-Tahzeeb, by Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, vol. 9, p. 144; Fat'h al-Bari fi Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari, by Ibn Hajar Asqalani, vol. 7, p. 305; al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar al-Haythami, Ch. 11, section 1, p. 249; al-Tathkirah, by al-Qurtubi, p. 617; al-Hawi, by al-Suyuti, vol. 2, pp. 165-166; Sharh al-Mawahib al-Ladunniyyah, by al-Zurqani, vol. 5, p. 348; Fat'h al-Mugheeth, by al-Sakhawi, vol. 3, p. 41; Kanz al-Ummal, vol. 7, p. 186; Iqd al-Durar Fi Akhbar al-Mahdi al-Muntadhar, vol. 12, Ch. 1; al-Bayan fi Akhbar Sahib al-Zaman, By Ganji al-Shafi'i, Ch. 12; al-Fusool al-Muhimmah, by Ibn Sabbagh al-Maliki, Ch. 12; Arjahul Matalib, by Ubaidallah Hindi al-Hanafi, p. 380; Muqaddimah, by Ibn Khaldoon, p. 266; and also in the works of Ibn Habban, Abu Nua'ym, Ibn Asakir, etc.
- [20.](#) Sahih al-Tirmidhi, vol. 5, p. 137; Sunan Abu Dawud, vol. 4, p. 292; al-Mustadrak, by al-Hakim, vol. 4, p. 278 who said it is authentic based on the criteria of the two Shaikhs (i.e., al-Bukhari and Muslim); Ma'arifat Ulum al-Hadith, by al-Hakim, p. 189; Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 95; Fadha'il al-Sahaba, by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, vol. 2, p. 676, Tradition #1155; al-Tabaqat, by Ibn Sa'd, vol. 5, p. 91
- [21.](#) Holy Quran, Suratul Ankabut ayah 14 talks about it
- [22.](#) Holy Quran, Suratul Kahf ayah 25 talks about it
- [23.](#) Holy Quran, Suratul Maryam ayahs 30-33 talk about it.
- [24.](#) Biblical name Ezra
- [25.](#) Holy Quran, Suratul Baqarah (2), Ayah 259
- [26.](#) Holy Quran, Suratun Nisa (4), Ayahs 157 and 158 talks about it, it says that they say they killed Jesus but they did not.

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