

Lesson 24: The Method of Choosing the Imam or Leader

One of the topics which have been constantly under discussion among Muslims since the very rise of Islam is the question of selecting the Imam or the Leader; it is in fact this question that brought about the division of the ummah into Shi'ah and Sunni.

The Shi'ah are committed to the principle that the right to designate the Imam belongs exclusively to God, and that the people have no role to play in this respect. It is the Creator alone Who selects the Imam and identifies him to the people by means of the Prophet.

The attachment of the Shi'ah to this understanding of the Imamate, and the attention they have lavished on the belief that God and the Prophet alone may choose the Imam who serves as God's proof in each age, spring, however, from a profound respect for the rights and dignity of man.

In just the same way that prophethood implies a whole series of attributes and conditions, so too the office of the Imam, coming after the Prophet, must similarly be accompanied by certain qualities. This necessity arises from the fact that the Shi'ah refuse to accept as Leader of the community anyone lacking in the key qualities of justice, inerrancy, and perspicacity. A proper command of the religious sciences, an ability to proclaim God's Laws and ordinances and to implement them in society in the appropriate way, and, in general, to guard and protect God's religion none of this is possible in the absence of those qualities.

God is aware of the spiritual capacities, religious rank, and piety of the Imam, and in accordance with this awareness He knows, too, to whom the custodianship of religious knowledge should be entrusted: who it is that can carry this burden and not neglect for a minute the duties of summoning men to God and implementing divine justice. But quite apart from this aspect of the matter, the Shi'i understanding of the Imamate also reflects a lofty human ideal.

If we say that people have no right to interfere in the matter of choosing the Imam, it is because they cannot be adequately informed of the inner purity and piety of individuals, of the degree to which they

adhere to the values of Islam and the Qur'an; above all, they cannot perceive the presence or absence of the divine principle of inerrancy.

It was therefore the prerogative of the Prophet to designate his successor, and of the Imam in each age to select and appoint Leaders.

If, however, a claimant to the Imamate was able to demonstrate ability to communicate with the unseen and to display inerrancy in his exercise of leadership, in a fashion akin to the miraculous powers of the prophets, then his claim might legitimately be accepted.

There are the methods proposed by the Shi'ah for recognizing and gaining access to the Imam; they form a set of criteria that prevented the true header of the Muslims in each age from remaining unrecognized.

The other approach to the matter is in stark contrast to that of the Shi'ah. Because there was a certain vagueness and ambiguity surrounding the consultative principle in its application to the question of leadership from the very beginning, the Sunni community resorted to a variety of methods for selecting and designating the caliph, so that in practice the following elements came to play an important role.

1: Consensus (*ijma'*). The Sunnis say that the choice of caliph rests first and foremost on selection by the community, so that if the ummah elects a given individual as its leader, he must be accepted as such and his commands must be obeyed.

As proof of this they cite the method followed by the Companions of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, after his death. Gathered together at the Saqifah to select a caliph, a majority decided upon Abu Bakr and swore allegiance to him; so that thereby he was recognized by consensus as successor to the Prophet without any objection being raised. This constitutes one method for designating a caliph.

2: The second method consists of Consultation and the exchange of views among the prominent members of the Muslim community. Once they agree among themselves on the choice of a leader for the community, his caliphate becomes legitimate and it is incumbent on everyone to obey him.

This is the method that was adopted by the second caliph. When 'Umar was about to die, he nominated six people as candidates for the caliphate and told them to select one of their own number as leader of the Muslim community by discussing the matter among themselves for not more than six days; if four or five people were able to reach an agreement, the opponent were to be disregarded. A six-man assembly was accordingly convened, and after the necessary deliberations the caliphate was awarded to 'Uthman. This, too, is said to constitute a legitimate means of selecting the caliph.

3: The third method consists of the caliph nominating his own successor. This happened in the case of 'Umar, who was appointed caliph by Abu Bakr without any objection being raised by the Muslims.

Such, in essence, is the position of the Sunnis on this matter.

Let us now review the objections to which each of these proceedings is subject.

The necessity of the inerrancy of the Imam, of his possessing a firm grasp and a comprehensive command of all religious matters, in both principle and detail, is rooted in the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, as well as being vindicated by historical experience. All the oppression, wrongdoing, corruption and error that we see in Islamic history arose from the fact that the leaders did not have the necessary qualities of an Imam. Even if all the members of the Islamic ummah choose a given individual as Imam and successor to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, this cannot ill and of itself bestow legitimacy and validity On his caliphate.

As for the caliphate of Abu Bakr, all the Muslims, in any event, did not swear allegiance to him, so there was no question of any true consensus being formed. It is also an undeniable historical fact that no real election took place, in the sense of all the Muslims who were scattered in various places converging on Madinah to take part in an electoral process. Indeed, not all the people of Madinah participated in the meeting where the decision was made, and some of the Prophet's Family and Companions, as well as some of those present at the Saqifah, refused to proclaim their loyalty to Abu Bakr.

Ali b. Abi Talib, peace be upon him, al-Miqdad, Salman, al-Zubayr, 'Ammar b. Yasir, 'Abdullah b. Mas'ud, Sa'd b. 'Ubadah, Abbas b. Abd al-Muttalib, Usamah b. Zayd, Ibn Abi Ka'b, 'Uthman b. Hunayf, as well as a number of other leading Companions, objected vocally to the caliphate of Abu Bakr and by no means concealed their opposition. How then can the caliphate of Abu Bakr be regarded as having rested on consensus?

It might be said that the participation of everyone in the selection of the successor to the Prophet is not necessary, and that if a number of leading and well-informed people reach a certain decision this is enough and entitles the caliph to acceptance and obedience.

However, why should their decision be binding on everyone else? Why should other reputable and outstanding figures, whose commitment and devotion were beyond all doubt, have been excluded from making a decision that was to have such far-reaching consequences for the fate of the Islamic ummah? Why should they submit unconditionally to a decision reached by others?

What proof is there for the legitimacy of such a procedure? Why should a historical event of this type constitute a legitimate or binding precedent?

A procedure of this type can be regarded as legitimate only if it is explicitly designated as such in the Qur'an or the *Sunnah*, in the sense of the verse in which God declares:

"Take and accept that which the Messenger ordains, and abandon that which he forbids." (59:7)

As for the Companions, there is no proof that they necessarily acted correctly, apart from which some of

them disagreed with others, and there is no reason in principle to prefer the views of one group of the Companions over those of another.

It is true that a majority of the people of Madinah gave their allegiance to Abu Bakr and thus ratified his selection as caliph, but those who refused to do so did not commit any sin, for freedom to choose is the natural right of every Muslim, and the minority is not obliged to follow the views of the majority. No one can be compelled to swear allegiance to someone whom he does not wish to see at the helm of Muslim affairs or to join a compact he rejects.

When a majority does force a minority to conform to its own views, it violates the rights of the minority.

Now those Companions who were gathered around Ali, peace be upon him, were compelled to follow the majority that had given allegiance to Abu Bakr, even though neither God nor the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, had ordained any such act; it was therefore a clear violation of their rights and their freedom.

Worse than this was the fact that Ali b. Abi Talib was forced to participate in the swearing of allegiance and to change his position, even though he was the one whom the Messenger of God had named an authority for every believing man and woman. No one with a sense of justice can approve such a denial of freedom.

It must also be said that Muslims of later generations who adopt a negative attitude to a granting of allegiance made by their ancestors cannot be condemned for this or regarded as sinners.

During the caliphate of Ali, people such as Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas and 'Abdullah b. 'Umar refused him their allegiance, but in his magnanimity the Imam left them free to do so and did not compel them to pledge him their obedience.

In addition to all this, if the caliph is not designated by the Prophet, no one can be forced to follow the mode of conduct prescribed by a caliph whose only claim to legitimacy is popular election. Such election does not bestow on him immunity from error and sin, nor does it enhance his religious knowledge and awareness. The ordinary believer retains the right of following someone other than the caliph, and this applies still more forcefully to the one whose level of religious learning is higher than of the caliph.

However, when allegiance is sworn in obedience to a command of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, this indeed counts as a swearing of allegiance to the Messenger of God himself; then no disobedience may be countenanced, and obedience to the one to whom allegiance is given is incumbent not only on the Muslims of that time but on those of all succeeding generations. In addition, the Qur'an regards allegiance given to the Prophet as equivalent to allegiance given to God. Thus the Qur'an says:

"O Messenger, the believers who swear allegiance to you have in reality pledged their allegiance

***to God; God's hand is placed on their hands. Whoever thereafter violates his oath of allegiance works towards his own perdition, and whoever remains faithful to the covenant he has concluded with God will soon receive from Him an abundant reward."* (48: 10)**

It is self-evident that the successor chosen by the Prophet will be the most perceptive of men and the most knowledgeable concerning the ordinances of the Qur'an and the religion of God; in fact he will possess all the qualities of the Prophet with the exception of receiving revelation, and whatever command he gives will be based on justice and the implementation of God's laws.

The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, is related to have said: "My community will never agree upon an error." However, this tradition cannot be adduced with respect to the question of successorship for it would then contradict the commands of the Prophet and effectively cause people to disregard his words; it would permit them to prefer their own views to his. Whatever applicability it may have must be confined to cases where there is no clear or authoritative ruling from the Qur'an or the *Sunnah*.

What was intended by the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, was that the community would not agree upon an error in cases where the ummah is permitted by God to solve its affairs by mutual consultation, where such consultation takes place in an atmosphere free from intimidation, and where a given choice of action is unanimously approved. If, however, a certain group of people incline in a certain direction and then try to impose their views on others and compel their agreement, there is no reason to regard the outcome as representing a valid consensus.

As for the swearing of allegiance (*bay'ah*) that took place at the Saqifah even if God and the Messenger had given permission for the matter to be decided on the basis of consultation, no true consultation took place. A certain group of individuals set the agenda in advance and then expended great effort to attain the result they themselves wanted. This is the reality of the matter, as was even the second caliph himself came to acknowledge:

"The selection of Abu Bakr as leader came about by accident; it did not happen through consultation and the exchange of views. If someone invites you to follow the same procedure again, kill him."^{[1](#)}

In the course of a sermon he delivered at the beginning of his caliphate, the first caliph apologized to the people in these words:

"The swearing of allegiance to me was a mistake; may God protect us from its evil consequences. I myself am fearful of the harm it may cause."^{[2](#)}

During his event-filled life, the Prophet of Islam, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, showed great concern for the welfare of the Muslims and paid great attention to the preservation of religion and the unity and security of the Muslim community. He feared greatly the emergence of division and disunity, and wherever the Muslims went and established their control, the first thing he did was to

appoint a governor or commander for the region. Similarly, commanders were always appointed in advance whenever a battle was being planned, and even deputy commanders were appointed to take over the leadership of the army if necessary.

Whenever he set out on a journey, he appointed someone as governor to administer the affairs of Madinah.

Given all this, how is it possible that he should not have given any thought to the fate of the community after his death, to its need for a guide and a leader, a need on which the destiny of the community in this world and the hereafter depended?

Is it possible that God should send a messenger to guide men and to found a religion; that the messenger should endure all kinds of hardship and difficulty in order to convey God's commands to mankind, and that he should then quit this world without making any further provision? Would this at all be a wise or logical course of action?

Would any leader be content to entrust the fruit of his efforts and struggles to blind chance?

Messengerhood was a divine trust given to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, and he was far too exalted a personality to neglect that trust in any way, particularly by leaving its preservation to chance. Making the designation of his successor dependent on election would have been tantamount to precisely that, for the outcome of any election is always a matter of chance.

If the purpose of religion is to educate humans in their humanity and if the laws of religion are to promote the development and refinement of humanity, a leader must always exist together with the religion in order to secure the material and spiritual needs of the individual and the community and guide men in their upward progress.

There can be no doubt that governmental power is needed in order to obtain the implementation of God's laws and the preservation of His commands, and this need implies in turn the necessity for a leader and guide who will assist men in their strivings and counteract their lack of full awareness and their vulnerability to satanic suggestion. In the absence of such a leader, religion will become muddled and distorted by superstition and arbitrary opinion, and the divine trust that is religion and revelation will be betrayed.

Furthermore, if the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, had left it to the Muslims to select the caliph, he would have done so with the utmost clarity and in the most categorical way possible, also specifying the procedures they were to follow in choosing and appointing him.

Are the affairs of the ummah after the death of the Prophet of no concern to God and His Messenger? Are the people more farsighted than God and His Messenger, or better able to discern who the leader should be?

If the Prophet did not appoint a successor (*khalifah*) to himself, why did Abu Bakr do so? And if the Prophet did do so, why was the one he selected pushed aside?

Another problem that arises with respect to the choice of caliph on the basis of mutual consultation is that the Imam must be the guide of the ummah in all matters of religious knowledge. No one can doubt that he must have in addition to faith and commitment comprehensive knowledge of God's laws, because in confronting the numerous and complex problems that arise the Muslims need a suitable authority to whom to turn for sure and reliable guidance. The successor to the Prophet must therefore be the heir to his knowledge, which makes the identification and recognition of the successor a matter of particular importance.

We have already explained the fundamental role of inerrancy (*'ismah*) in both the Prophet and in the leader (*imam*) designated by the Prophet. Now how can the Companions, who themselves lack inerrancy, take it on themselves to recognize one who is inerrant?

Furthermore, if it is the right of the Muslims that they should choose the successor to the Prophet, how can this right be restricted by 'Umar to a mere six people? All six were from among the Migrants, and not even a single one of the Helpers was assigned to advise them.

The verse:

"The Muslims are to organize their affairs on the basis of mutual consultation" (42:38)

serves only to indicate that one of the characteristics of the believers is to consult each other in their undertakings; it does not indicate in any way that leadership of the Muslims is to be based on majority vote, nor does it make incumbent obedience to the decisions taken by a caliph so elected. The verse does not even say anything about the way in which consultation is to be organized and whether or not the presence of all the Muslims is required.

Even if the consultative (*shura*) principle were to be applicable to the question of leadership, the decision would have to be made by means of a general exchange of views, not one restricted to a mere six people, in the selection of whom 'Umar did not see fit himself to consult with any of the Companions. He even awarded a veto to Abd al-Rahman b. 'Awf, who was well known for his wealth, something that cannot be justified by reference to Islamic principles. The deliberations of those six were, moreover, overshadowed by threats and intimidation, in that orders had been given for those who failed to agree with the majority to be put to death.

When appointing 'Umar to be caliph, Abu Bakr did not consult with anyone, nor obviously enough did he leave the question of his successor to the people for them to decide; it was entirely a personal decision on his part.

In any event, the consultative principle becomes operative only when the leader himself convenes a

consultative assembly for an exchange of views on various questions, notably current topics touching on social relations and policies adopted by the leader in response to social need.

Consultation with relevant specialists takes place, but after their opinions have been heard, it is the leader himself who takes the final decision. For his religious knowledge is superior to that of everyone else, and it is his pronouncements that enjoying public support are worthy of being put into effect. Unity of direction and leadership must at all times be preserved, because a divergence of opinion, in the absence of a leader making the final decision, will paralyze the government. Thus the Qur'an says:

"Obey God and the Messenger, and never be drawn into dispute and disagreement, lest you be defeated and your power be scattered to the winds." (8:49)

It should also be borne in mind that *Surah al-Shura* was revealed in Makkah, at a time when the Islamic system of government had not yet taken shape, and that at no time was the government of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, based upon consultation.

The verse concerning consultation is, then, a general encouragement of the believers to consult with each other, and it has nothing to do with matters of governance and leadership. It relates to practical concerns of the Muslims, to the various problems that confront the Muslims. There is absolutely no justification for interpreting the verse as sanctioning the designation of the caliph by means of mutual consultation, for during the age of revelation government was exclusively in the hands of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family.

Furthermore, the part of the verse recommending consultation treats of the desirability of spending one's property in God's path, which is also something desirable but not mandatory.

Yet another consideration is that the verse occurs in a context dealing with the wars of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family. Some of the verses are addressed to the Muslims in general and the warriors among them in particular, and others to the Prophet individually. It is plain that in this context the encouragement to consult is inspired by compassion for the believers, by concern for their morale; it is not that the Prophet is obliged to act in accordance with the opinions of those he consults. For the Qur'an clearly proclaims:

"Whenever you take a decision, place your trust in God and act in accordance with your own opinion and wish." (3: 159)

This context also suggests that consultation applies to military matters, particularly to the concerns that arose during the Battle of Badr, for the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, consulted his Companions about the advisability of attacking the Quraysh trade caravan led by Abu Sufyan that was returning from Syria. First Abu Bakr expressed his opinion, which was rejected by the Prophet; then 'Umar expressed his, which was likewise rejected; and finally al-Miqdad gave his opinion, and the Prophet accepted it.^{[3](#)}

If the Prophet consulted with others, it was not in order to learn from them an opinion superior to his own as a prelude to acting in accordance with it. His aim was rather to train them in the methods of consultation and the discovery of correct views. In contrast to worldly rulers who refused ever to consult ordinary people, because of their pride and arrogance, the Prophet was instructed by God to show the believers his concern and compassion for them by consulting with them, at the same time increasing their self-esteem and learning what they thought. However, the final decision was always his, and in the case of the Battle of Badr, God informed him in advance of what the result would be, and he in turn conveyed this to his Companions after consulting with them.

The command to consult and to exchange views is also for the sake of finding the best way of fulfilling a given duty, not for identifying what is a duty and what is not; this is an important difference.

Once a clear and authoritative prescription exists in the Qur'an or the *Sunnah*, there is no ground for consultation to take place. Society has no right to discuss commands that are grounded in revelation, for in principle such discussion might result in the annulment of God's laws. In just the same way, consultation is meaningless in any human society once the legal duties of its members have been determined.

The successorship of Ali, peace be upon him, was clearly established by the Prophet in accordance with divine command at Ghadir Khumm, at the beginning of the Prophet's mission, and again when he was on his deathbed. There was therefore no issue needing to be settled by consultation.

The Qur'an does not permit individuals to entertain their own views on any subject where divine legislation exists, for it says:

"When God and His Messenger determine a matter, no choice remains therein for any believing woman or man. Whoever turns away from the command of God and His Messenger has openly chosen misguidance." (33:36)

Or again:

"God creates and chooses whatever He wishes, and men have no right to choose in opposition to His choice." (28:67)

Since the choice and selection of a leader is exclusively God's prerogative, and since in fact He designated a leader, it is meaningless to seek out others as possible leaders.

The task of the Imam is guiding men and demonstrating to them the path that will lead them to happiness. That being the case, the correct method for the selection of an Imam is the same as that which the Qur'an spells out for the prophets:

"It is indeed incumbent on Us to guide mankind, for the kingdom of this world and the hereafter is Ours." (92:11-12)

It is then the responsibility of God alone to provide for the guidance of mankind and to make available to it whatever it needs at the various stages of existence. Part of what it needs is assuredly guidance, and only the one whom God has appointed may present himself as a guide. Numerous verses of the Qur'an bear witness that God bestowed the status of guide on the Prophet.

The appointment of an Imam as successor to the Messenger of God takes place for exactly the same purpose as the mission of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, which is serving mankind as a guide and exemplar to whom obedience is due. This being the case, no one has the right to lay claim to this function or to demand obedience without a proof of having been appointed by God. If someone nonetheless does do so, he will be usurping God's right.

The Sunni theory that sees in Abu Bakr's designation of his successor a justification for such a procedure is open to another objection. If the designation is made by an inerrant Imam, it is valid and authoritative, for one possessor of inerrancy can recognize another and safely entrust the affairs of the ummah to him. If this not be the case, one lacking the quality of inerrancy has no right to designate a caliph whom people are obliged to obey. If it be said that this is what Abu Bakr did and no one objected, it must be answered that severe objections were indeed raised, but no attention was paid to them.

Such are the views of the Sunni scholars concerning the legitimacy of three different methods of choosing the caliph, and the objections that need to be made to those views.

- [1.](#) Ibn Hisham, Sirah, Vol. IV, p. 308; al-Tabari, Tarikh; Ibn al-Athir, al-Kamil; Ibn Kathir, al-Bidayah.
- [2.](#) Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid, Sharh, Vol. I, p. 132.
- [3.](#) Muslim, al-Sahih, "Kitab al-Jihad wa Sayr" Bab: Ghuzwah Badr, Vol. III, p. 1403.

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