

The Twelve Imams Part 2

There is an interesting tradition in Sahih al-Bukhari as well as Sahih Muslim, in which the Prophet (S) said the following:

Sahih al-Bukhari Hadith: 9.422

Narrated Abu Sa'id al-Khudri:

The Prophet said, "You will follow the ways of those nations who were before you, span by span and cubit by cubit (i.e., inch by inch) so much so that even if they entered a hole of a mastigure (lizard), you would follow them." We said, "O Allah's Apostle! (Do you mean) the Jews and the Christians?" He said, "Whom else?"

As the above tradition in Sahih al-Bukhari confirms, the Prophet stated that the history of the Children of Israel will be repeated for Muslims. In fact, Qur'an has mentioned the stories of the Children of Israel to give us a way to understand the true history of Islam itself. There are many striking similarities in this regard written in Qur'an including the similarities of the leaders and the similarities of the people. I just mention few of them here. Allah, to whom belong Might and Majesty, said:

"Surely Allah aforetime took a covenant from the Children of Israel and We appointed twelve leaders among them" (Qur'an 5: 12)

وَلَقَدْ أَخَذَ اللَّهُ مِيثَاقَ بَنِي إِسْرَآئِيلَ وَبَعَثْنَا مِنْهُمُ اثْنَيْ عَشَرَ نَقِيبًا

Who are those twelve leaders among the Children of Muhammad (S)?

Allah, Exalted, also said:

"And when Moses prayed for water for his (thirsty) people; We said: 'Strike the rock with your staff.' Then from there surged forth twelve springs so that each group knew its own place to drink." (Qur'an 2:60).

وَإِذِ اسْتَسْقَىٰ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ فَقُلْنَا اضْرِبْ بِعَصَاكَ الْحَجَرَ فَانْفَجَرَتْ مِنْهُ اثْنَتَا عَشْرَةَ عَيْنًا قَدْ عَلِمَ كُلُّ أُنَاسٍ مَّشْرِبَهُمْ

Who are those twelve springs (streams) of knowledge who quench the thirst of Muslims to the end of the world so that each generation is utilized with one of them? He, Exalted He is, also said:

***"We divided them into twelve nations. We directed Moses by revelation when his (thirsty) people asked him for water: 'Strike the rock with your staff;' out of it there gushed forth twelve springs so that each group knew its own place for water. We gave them the shade of clouds and sent down to them manna and quails (saying): 'Eat of the good things We have provided for you,' (but they rebelled.) To Us they did no harm but they harmed their own souls."*(Qur'an 7: 160).**

Verily those who did not follow those twelve leaders, harmed non but themselves. The above verse suggests that the nation of the Prophet Muhammad (S) in the span of history (after his demise till the day of judgment) are divided into 12 intervals of time which coincides with one Imam who is assigned as leader for them. In the next verse Allah said:

"And when it was said unto them: 'Dwell in this Town and eat therein as you wish, and say Repentance, and enter the Gate (of the city) in a posture of humility, in order that We forgive you your sins and increase (the portion of) those who do good.'"(Qur'an 7: 161)

or:

"And when We said: 'Enter this Town and eat of the plenty therein as you wish; but enter the Gate (of the City) with humility in posture and in words so that We forgive you your sins and increase (the portion of) those who do good.'"(Qur'an 2:58).

The Gate in the above verses has a striking similarity with one of the attributes of Imam 'Ali (as) mentioned by our Prophet (S) that is: "The Gate of the City of Knowledge."

The Messenger of Allah said: "I am the City of Knowledge, and 'Ali is its Gate. So whoever intends to enter the City and the Wisdom, he should enter from its Gate."

إِنَّا مَدِينَةُ الْعِلْمِ وَ عَلِيٌّ بَابُهَا، فَمَنْ أَرَادَ الْمَدِينَةَ وَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَلْيَأْتِهَا مِنْ بَابِهَا

– Sahih al-Tirmidhi, v5, pp 201,637

– al-Mustadrak, by al-Hakim, v3, pp 126–127,226

– Fadha'il al-Sahaba, by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, v2, p635, Tradition #1081

and many more...

Furthermore the following Prophetic tradition gives the utmost similarity with the above two verses:

The Messenger of Allah said: "My Ahlul-Bait are like the Gate of Repentance of the Children of Israel; whoever entered therein was forgiven."

إنما مثل أهل بيتي فيكم مثل باب حطة في بني إسرائيل من دخله غفر

Sunni References:

- Majma' al-Zawa'id, by al-Haithami, v9, p168.
- al-Awsat, by al-Tabarani, Tradition #18
- Arba'in, by al-Nabahani, p216
- A fairly similar tradition reported by al-Darqunti and by Ibn Hajar al-Haithami in al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqa, Ch. 9, section 2, p193, in which the Prophet (S) said: "Ali is the Gate of Repentance, whoever entered therein was a believer and whoever went out was an unbeliever."

Also Allah (SWT) stated in Qur'an:

Lo! The number of the months with Allah is twelve which is Allah's ordinance when He created the heavens and the earth. Four of them are sacred. That is the firm religion. So wrong not your souls in them. (Qur'an 9:36)

إِنَّ عِدَّةَ الشُّهُورِ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ اثْنَا عَشَرَ شَهْرًا فِي كِتَابِ اللَّهِ

In connection with the above verse of Qur'an, it would be nice to look at the following tradition in Sahih al-Bukhari:

Sahih al-Bukhari Hadith: 5.688

Narrated Abu Bakra:

The Prophet said, "Time has taken its original shape which it had when Allah created the Heavens and the Earth. The year is of twelve months, four of which are sacred... Surely, you will meet your Lord, and He will ask you about your deeds. Beware! Do not become infidels after me, cutting the throats of one another. It is incumbent on those who are present to convey this message (of mine) to those who are absent. May be that some of those to whom it will be conveyed will understand it better than those who have actually heard it." He (i.e. Prophet) then added twice, "No doubt! Haven't I conveyed (Allah's Message) to you?"

Now one may ask that what was in the above message that could not be understood by the companions who were listening to the speech of the Prophet during his last pilgrimage in Mecca? (For timing see also Sahih al-Bukhari Hadith: 2.798).

The Message of the Prophet (S) had twofold meaning. The obvious meaning is that the number of months are twelve and four months, namely Dhul-Qa'da, Dhul-Hajja, Muharram, and Rajab are sacred months. In fact, these months were believed to be sacred even before Islam. So there was nothing in this message that the audience could not comprehend.

Moreover, the fact the above mentioned sacred months of the year were accepted by the Jews and Christians, makes it clear that these months can not be "the firm religion" as mentioned in the verse. So one should look for a more delicate meaning.

The other meaning (as interpreted by Ahlul-Bait) is that the Prophet in his last pilgrimage (less than three month before his demise) wanted to convey that he will be followed by twelve Imams and people should not wrong their souls by disobeying them in their leadership periods. Among these twelve Imams, four have a sacred name, i.e., "Ali", which is derived from the name of Allah. In fact, four Imams of Ahlul-Bait (peace be upon them all) have been named "Ali".

In the Sira of Ibn Hisham, there is an extra sentence of the Messenger of Allah which is, in fact, the verse of Qur'an. The Messenger of Allah (S) said:

"Postponement of a sacred month is only an excess of disbelief whereby those who disbelieve are misled; they allow it one year and forbid it another year that they may make up the number of months which God has hallowed so that they permit what God has forbidden (Qur'an 9:37),

and forbid what God has allowed. Time has completed its cycle and is as it was on the day that God created the heavens and the earth. The number of months with God is twelve. Four of them are sacred."

Sunni references:

- Sira, by Ibn Hisham at the end of Chapter of "Farewell Pilgrimage", p968
- The Life of Muhammad (English translation of Sira Ibn Hisham), Translated into English by A. Guillaume, 1955 Edition, London, p651

Postponement of the sacred month is delay in accepting their leadership and as the messenger of Allah said, those who disbelieve in their leadership will be misled. They permit what God has forbidden, and forbid what God has allowed. They try to make up the twelve Imams by that which Allah has not honored.

The fact that some sects departed from the main body of the Shi'a in the history was because they only accepted first few Imams and rejected the rest. It is interesting to know that he who acknowledged all

four "Ali" among the Imams, he has acknowledged all the twelve Imams, since there did not remain any sect believing in these four Imams and rejecting others. In a tradition on the authority of Jabir (ra), Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, the fifth Imam of Ahlul-Bait, interprets the above verse which is as follows:

Jabir said: I asked Imam Muhammad al-Baqir about the meaning of the verse: "Verily the number of the months ... (9:36)." He (as) breathed long (out of sorrow) and said: "O Jabir, The 'year' is my grandfather, the messenger of Allah (S), and his family are its 'months' who are the twelve Imams, and are ... (naming the Imams one by one). They are the Proofs of Allah on His creation, and Trustees of His revelations and His knowledge. And Those of 'four sacred who are the firm religion' are those four who have the same name, and are 'Ali, the Commander of Faithful (as), and my father 'Ali Ibn al-Husayn (as), and later 'Ali Ibn Musa (as), and 'Ali Ibn Muhammad (as). Thus acknowledging these four is 'the firm religion, so wrong not your souls in them' and believe in all of them to be guided."

Shi'i reference: Kitab al-Ghaiba, by Shaikh Tusi.

Side Comments

A Sunni brother mentioned that there is a tradition which states "The Caliphate will last 30 years after me then there will be kings." These 30 years covered the Caliphate of Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib, as well as the 6 month rule of al-Hasan Ibn 'Ali. After these 30 years, the leadership went to Mu'awiya. As for the 5th Caliph through the 11th Allah knows best, and the 12th will be al-Mahdi al-Muntadhar.

The above alleged tradition seems to be very odd, because Caliph means successor/deputy. The successor of the Prophet (or the preceding Caliph) should come right after the demise of the Prophet (or the preceding Caliph) without any gap so that the word "successor" or "deputy" make any sense. Also as narrated in Sahih Muslim, The Prophet (S) suggested those twelve Caliphs cover till the day of resurrection.

See Qur'an 13:7 in which Allah states that Prophet Muhammad is a warner, and for every community (generation) there exists a Guide (Imam). Who was the Guide after the fifth Caliph? Who is the Guide today? Who is the Ulul-Amr whose obedience is as much obligatory as the Prophet? Who is the one spared by Allah (Baqiyatullah) about whom Allah said:

That who is spared by Allah (on the earth) is better for you if you are believers. (Qur'an 11:86)

The above verse is another proof for the fact that there exists one individual at each era whom Allah has spared on the earth to maintain the cause of faith and he is the Imam of that age. Thus the position of God-assigned leadership is never vacated so long as the earth carries even one human being. (Please see the article titled: "Necessity of the Existence of Imam al-Mahdi (as)" for more detailed discussion of this subject).

Moreover, You still did not answer who the rest of those twelve Imams are? You claimed that Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, 'Ali, al-Hasan are the first five Caliphs, but you did not mention the rest. There is no doubt that the Caliph should be known to his followers, otherwise an imaginary Caliph can not be followed while the Prophet had asked us to closely follow them. If you don't know your leaders, how can you obey them?

It is very important to know that the saying of whom should be followed (Which Caliph or Imam) since Allah unequivocally ordered us in Qur'an to follow them as Ulul-Amr, and moreover, the Prophet ordered us to follow them as one of the two weighty things. Obeying them is the only way of salvation as the Prophet testified (Please see the article titled: "Qur'an and Ahlul-Bait").

Now tell me my brother, what happened that after 30 years the kings were going to come? Do you agree that misconduct of some people like Mu'awiya caused such scandal for the Muslim nation? What went wrong? You claim that these people were the best generation. Then how could they allow themselves to convert the caliphate into a hereditary monarchy? It is quite probable that the very same kings fabricated the tradition of "Thirty Years" in order to dissuade people from the issue of twelve Imams and to justify their usurping the rule.

Another Sunni brother commented that out of the twelve Shi'a Imams, only Imam 'Ali and his son Imam al-Hasan physically governed, and as such, how do the Shi'a assert that the Prophet was referring to these individuals when he mentioned the twelve Caliphs?

The answer is: Allah by His Grace, has assigned Prophets and their successors to warn us and to guide us to the Right Path. It is upon our decision whether we use our wisdom and accept their instructions or not. We are not compelled to follow a divinely appointed Imam, though we will be held responsible for that. It is our choice to go right or wrong.

Leadership has two parts. The first part is the leader. We believe that since Allah knows who is the best for such position, He assigns the leader for mankind, as indicated in Qur'an (see Qur'an 2: 124, 21:73, 32:24, etc.). The appointment of Imam may be known through the declaration of the Prophet or the preceding Imam.

In order that the leadership manifests itself in rulership, there is a second part necessary, that is the followers. There should be some followers for that leader to lead them and eventually be able establish his government.

Allah has completed His bounty upon us by assigning leadership. It is upon us to do the other part, that is to follow the leadership of the Prophet and his Ahlul-Bait. If we do so, the leader will come automatically into power in this worldly life. However, if we disobey them, the leader seemingly has no power in appearance and he will remain as the spiritual leader for his few loyal followers (Imam al-Muttaqin/ leader of god-fearing people).

Muslims can not deny that prophets (some of whom were Imams of their time as well) were assigned by God. Now, if we study their lives, some of which have been explained in Qur'an, we see that the majority of them were oppressed in their communities. Let us look at the life of Prophet John (Yahya). He was a prophet assigned by Allah, and people were supposed to obey him, but they did not support him. Instead, they slaughtered him and chopped his head off. Now, one may ask: Was not he an Imam? Did Allah fail to support his Prophet? The answer is that Allah has given people some free will to either accept or reject the leadership He assigns. In the case of Prophet John, people rejected him, and obviously they will go to Hell for their disobedience. The same goes for the Prophet Abraham (as) who was also Imam. Qur'an states:

***"And when Abraham was tested by his Lord with certain commands and he fulfilled them. Then He said: Lo! I appoint you an Imam for mankind."*(Qur'an 2: 124).**

People were supposed to follow such divinely appointed who was assigned by Allah, but they stood against him. They even went as much as throwing him into fire. Thus the above verse clearly shows that the Imam who is assigned by Allah may not physically govern in appearance.

Therefore leadership has two parts. Allah does His part out of His Grace. It is our choice if we fulfill the other part by adhering to such leader in order to attain the prosperity of this world and of the hereafter. In the case of our Imams, though they were the best qualified people for leadership and though they were assigned by Allah and His Prophet, the majority of people disobeyed them. This is not surprising since the history of mankind repeats itself.

As such, Imam 'Ali (as) was Imam during the time of the first three rulers after the demise of the Prophet (S), and what these rulers could take from him was the rulership and not the position of Imamat.

In other words, a divinely appointed Imam is the most the qualified individual to be the ruler, but concept of Imamat has much more than just rulership. Imam is the Guide for the God-fearing people, and possesses the full knowledge of Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet, and is the protected place of refuge for the disagreements in the matter of religion.

A remark, however, is that the case for Imam al-Mahdi (as) would be different. He is the one who will en his rule with the help of Allah when Allah let him appear. That is why he has been given the title of al-Qa'im (the one who shall stand).

A Sunni brother replied that according to Qur'an Abraham (as) said: And make me for the God fearing an Imam. Imam- you translate it as leader, but with political connotation; however, it is clear here that the meaning is leader in the sense of first. You make it seem as if he is seeking to campaign for the position of Namrud or govern Iraq, or something like that when the message of Abraham was to lay out the road for the people to know Allah and worship him which is the main thing prophets were sent for.

My response was: As to whether the Prophet Abraham was supposed to be merely a spiritual Imam for the believers or an Imam who rules on the earth, my argument was clear, and apparently this brother did not comprehend it. I mentioned that a divinely appointed Imam such as Abraham, is an Imam whether people follow him or not. If (say the majority of) people follow him, he will automatically come into power, and if they disobey him, he will still possess his spiritual leadership for his few faithful followers (the God fearing people).

Brother, do you claim that Allah ordered only Muttaqin (the God fearing people) to follow Abraham, and other people were not ordered to follow him?! Every body at that time was supposed to obey Abraham, and those who did not are doomed to Hell. Also the verse 2: 124 of Qur'an clearly states Allah assigned him Imam for "mankind", not a specific group.

Moreover, your above comment that the prophets did not have any political agenda is not correct. By the above statement you are unintentionally opposing Prophet Muhammad who campaigned against the unbelievers of the Arabian Peninsula like Abu Sufyan, and made the first Islamic government. It is true that all the prophets were sent to educate people and make them mindful of Allah. But this can not be fully achieved without any political power.

Also I never mentioned that governing the state is the first goal of a divinely appointed leader. Rather, I said that such leader is the most qualified person for such position. People should realize this fact and submit to his command, and if they do that he will be automatically on the head of community without a need for "agenda".

A Sunni brother mentioned that even some individuals who disliked Shi'a very much such as Ibn Kathir in his book "al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya" has mentioned that al-Husayn (ra) is considered to be one of the twelve Caliphs.

About this, I would like to comment that if these Sunnis really believe that Imam al-Husayn (as) was one of the Caliphs, then they have already acknowledged what the Shi'a say! That is, the position of deputy/successor of the Prophet is not identified with the one who gains the control of power, otherwise Imam al-Husayn who did not physically govern, could not have been counted among the twelve Caliphs.

Also I agree that Ibn Kathir along with Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya hated the Shi'a, and most probably they learnt their hatred from their teacher Ibn Taimiyya. None of these personalities are admired by the Sunnis even though the Wahhabis have filled the libraries with the books of these individuals.