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17.’Ali Views the Succession

There is a theory that claims that the civil war which took place during the reign of Abu Bakr could have been avoided if ‘Ali had succeeded the Prophet. This interesting theory (which I neither confirm nor deny) is based upon the following reasons:

1. The declaration of the Prophet at Ghadir Khum while returning from his valedictory pilgrimage made thousands of pilgrims believe that he had chosen ‘Ali to succeed him.

What they understood from the declaration seemed to be consistent with their tradition which gives the authority to the closest relative of the leader. When they realized that the leadership had been handed to Abu Bakr after the death of the Prophet some of them opposed the new government and refused to pay to it the "Zakat"(the Islamic tax)

Others went further and deserted Islam thinking that the companions have disobeyed the declaration of the Prophet.

They thought that the companions were not serious in their adoption of Islam. And so the Arab tribes thought that they have the right to desert Islam and go back to paganism.

2. Had ‘Ali been the ruler after the Prophet his military reputation could have deterred anyone from challenging his leadership. The stories of his heroism were on every Arab's lips. The beduins as well as the settlers of villages and cities had experienced and witnessed his military actions during the last ten years of the life of the Prophet. Why should they take a risk of confronting him in a losing war?

Whether this theory is right or wrong the civil war was decisive concerning ‘Ali. It obliged him to stop his opposition to Abu Bakr and pledge his support lest the Muslim government be weakened in its struggle against the deserters of the faith. ‘Ali was too pious to continue his opposition when dangers were threatening the foundation of Islam.

For several months the Imam ‘Ali refused to join the electors of Abu Bakr and he was expected to continue to do so. The civil war however made it mandatory for him to reverse his position.

The view of the Imam can be presented as follows:

He believed that the leadership is his exclusive right. He was the treasurer of the knowledge of the Prophet his choice and his closest relative. It is reported that when Abu Bakr demanded from ‘Ali to join his electors ‘Ali replied:

"I have the right of leadership. I will not follow you when you ought to follow me." When Abu Bakr asked him: "Was not my election by the will of the people?" he replied: "But you told the Qureshites and the Medinites that you are entitled to the leadership because you are related to Muhammad and they conceded to you. I have the same argument against you."

Then he said: "We have more right in the Messenger of God alive and dead. We are the members of his House the place of his confidence the treasure of his knowledge and wisdom. No one from this nation can come close to the positions of the members of the House of Muhammad. And those who were indebted to their favor should not be equalized with them."1

He said also: "I am the executor of the Prophet his minister and the trustee of his secrets and knowledge... I am the first one who believed in him the most effective defender of Islam among you in combatting the pagans the most knowledgeable in the Book of God and the teaching of the Prophet and most foreseer of the consequences of the events. For how long do you deny us the leadership? Give us justice and acknowledge our rights as the Medinites did for you."2

‘Ali does not lack evidence on his executorship or ministerial posts. The Messenger conferred on him the post of executorship when he gathered his close relatives ten years before the Hijrah. At that conference the Prophet said to the members of his clan while his hand on ‘Ali's neck: "This is my brother executor and successor in you. Listen to him and obey him." To his ministerial post the authentically reported statement of the Prophet attests: "‘Ali would you not be pleased to be to me like Aaron to Moses but there shall be no Prophet after me?".

Aaron was the minister of Moses according to the Holy Qur'an:

"And grant me a minister from the members of my house Aaron my brother. Strengthen me by him and make him a sharer in my mission." The Holy Qur'an Chapter 20 verses 28-31.

As to his trustworthiness on the secrets of the Messenger and his knowledge it suffices to remember that the Messenger said: "I am the city of knowledge and ‘Ali is its gate.

Whoever wishes to enter the city should come through the gate.".

He Believed That Abu Bakr's Election Was Unbinding.

The Imam viewed the election of Abu Bakr to be unbinding to his electors. Evidently he believed that the

Messenger had chosen him to lead the nation and administer its affairs after him and that the choice of the Prophet is binding to the nation.

Thus the nation does not have the right to choose another leader. Had not the Imam believed in this he would not have allowed himself to ask the Medinites to reverse their position after they elected Abu Bakr.

A sound election is a covenant to be fulfilled and ‘Ali was too righteous to call upon people to break a legitimate covenant.

He and his wife Fatimah "Al-Zahra" (the Lady of Light) daughter of the Prophet visited the Medinite companions seeking their support and asking them to reverse their position towards Abu Bakr.

Muawiya in one of his letters to the Imam said:

... "And I remember when you used to carry your wife at night on a donkey while your hands in the hands of your sons Al-Hassan and Al-Hussein after Abu Bakr was elected. You called upon every Badrian and early Muslim to support you and went with your wife to them offering to them your two sons and asking them their help against the companion of the Messenger of God...."[3]

He Did not Want to Reach His Goal by Force

In spite of his belief that his right was usurped he did not try to regain it by force nor did he want to damage the unity of the Muslims The Imam realized that he does not have a strong support. The absolute majority of the Meccans were deadly against him. To them he was the man who was responsible for the death of many of their fathers brothers sons and relatives in his defensive campaign for Islam.

The Medinites were closer to him than the Qureshites but they did not have the will to sacrifice for his leadership. They had already entered into a pact with Abu Bakr and they thought that this exacts from them their loyalty.

‘Ali had some support from some outstanding companions such as Salman the Persian Abu Dharr Al-Bursa Ibn Azib Ammar Ibn Yasir Al-Miqdad Ibn Al-Aswad and Al-Zubayr Ibn Al-Awam. But these companions did not have the following. Thus the Imam found that patience was the only open avenue for him.

He Reversed His Position for the Sake of Unity

He could have continued his opposition to Abu Bakr as long as Abu Bakr lived. Saad Ibn Abadah continued his op position until Abu Bakr died. However the movement of desertion of the faith by the Arab tribes was to him a decisive factor that made him reverse his attitude. His op position to Abu Bakr was not motivated by a personal ambition. It was rather motivated by his desire to set the

Muslims on the true path of the Prophet. When Islam was threatened by the movement of desertion ‘Ali found it unwise to be concerned with the method of leading the Muslims when the very existence of Islam became endangered.

Al-Baladhuri recorded that when the Arabs deserted the faith of Islam Uthman came to ‘Ali saying: "Cousin no one will fight the enemy while you refuse to reconcile with Abu Bakr."[4] He convinced the Imam to go with him to Abu Bakr; when Abu Bakr saw the Imam they hugged each other and cried. The Muslims were pleased with that and determined to fight the deserters of the faith.

Al-Bukhari in his Sahih reported that the Imam said to Abu Bakr when they met: We recognize your position and what God has given you but you have taken over the leadership without our consultation. We believe that we have our share and right in the leadership because of our relationship to the Messenger of God. Abu Bakr cried they promised each other to meet at the Mosque at night.

‘Ali went to the Mosque and he told the people that he was not motivated in his opposition by a jealousy toward Abu Bakr nor by a denial of his position; but we believe he said that we have a right in this leadership and he took it without consulting us. Thus we felt uneasy."[5]

The Imam spoke of what took place in that period in a message he sent to the people of Egypt when he sent to them Malik Al-Ashtar as a governor:

"... And I withheld my hand until I found the deserters of the faith of Islam calling for the destruction of the religion of Muhammad. (As this danger emerged I reversed my position) and decided to aid Islam and its followers lest I witness a total or partial destruction in Islam then the tragedy to me becomes greater than losing your leadership which is only transitory."[6]

1. Abdul Fattah Abdul Maksoud Al-Imam ‘Ali Ibn Abu Talib Part 1 p. 179.
2. Al-Tabersi Al-Ihtijaj Part 1 p. 95.
3. Ibn Abu Al-Hadid his Commentraries on Nahjul-Balagha Vol. 1 p. 131.
4. Sayed Murtadha Al-Asakari conveyed this in his book: Abdullah Ibn Saha p. 73.
5. Al-Bukhari his Sahih Part 5 p. 108.
6. Nahjul-Balaghah Part 3 pp. 198-199.

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