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17. Issues Of The Ghaybah: The Two Roles Of The Imam

One of the major differences between the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah and the Shi'ah Imamiyyah – on the question of *al-mahdawiyyah* – concerns the location of the Awaited Mahdi at this present time. Most Sunnis maintain that he is not born yet, while all Shi'i Ithna 'Ashariyyah believe that he came into this world in 255 H, more than 1000 years ago. If the Shi'is were right, then where is he? What exactly is he doing, assuming he is alive? What use does he have for this *Ummah* at this very moment?

To address these questions, we will start first with the roles of the Imams sent by Allah to mankind. The Qur'an says:

> ووهبنا له إسحاق ويعقوب نافلة وكلا جعلنا صالحين وجعلناهم أئمة يهدون بأمرنا

And We bestowed upon him (i.e. Ibrahim) Ishaq and Ya'qub. Each one We made righteous. **And We appointed them Imams, GUIDING BY OUR COMMAND**.[1]

And:

> ولقد آتينا موسى الكتاب فلا تكن في مرية من لقائه وجعلناه هدى لبني إسرائيل وجعلنا منهم أئمة يهدون بأمرنا لما صبروا وكانوا بآياتنا يوقنون

And indeed We gave Musa the Book. So be not you in doubt of meeting him. And We made it a guide to the Children of Israel. **And We appointed from among them Imams GUIDING BY OUR COMMAND**, when they (i.e. the Imams) were patient and used to believe with certainty (*yaqin*) in Our Verses.[2]

So, the primary role of the Imam is to "guide" by the Command of Allah. The phrase "by Our Command" establishes three things about the Imams:

1. They are appointed and commissioned by explicit Divine Decrees.

2. They guide others in accordance with, and towards, the Command of Allah in every circumstance.

3. The Imams possess the Command of Allah over His creatures.

This is the first role of the Imams: to guide mankind onto, and by, the Command of Allah.

The second type of role is spelt out in this *hadith* of Shaykh al-Saduq (d. 381 H):

> حدثنا علي بن عبد الله الوراق قال: حدثنا سعد بن عبد الله، عن أحمد ابن إسحاق بن سعد الأشعري قال: دخلت على أبي محمد الحسن بن علي عليهما السلام وأنا أريد أن أسأله عن الخلف] من [بعده، فقال لي مبتدئا: يا أحمد بن إسحاق إن الله تبارك وتعالى لم يخل الأرض منذ خلق آدم عليه السلام ولا يخليها إلى أن تقوم الساعة من حجة لله على خلقه، به يدفع البلاء عن أهل الأرض، وبه ينزل الغيث، وبه يخرج بركات الأرض.

'Ali b. 'Abd Allah al-Warraq – Sa'd b. 'Abd Allah – Ahmad b. Ishaq b. Sa'd al-Ash'ari:

I went to Abu Muhammad al-Hasan b. 'Ali, peace be upon them both, and I intended to ask him about his successor. But, he said to me before I said anything, "O Ahmad b. Ishaq! Verily, Allah the Most Blessed, the Most High never leaves the earth since the creation of Adam, peace be upon him, and He will never leave it till establishment of the Hour, without an *Hujjah* of Allah over His creation. **Through him, calamity is averted from the people of the earth; through him, rain descends; and through him, the blessings of the earth come out**."[3]

Al-Haj Muhammad Zakariya says:

> إسناده معتبر

Its chain is reliable.[4]

'Allamah al-Majlisi (d. 1111 H) also copies:

> التوحيد، معاني الأخبار: أبي عن سعد عن ابن عيسى عن الحسين بن سعيد عن فضالة عن أبان عن محمد بن مسلم قال: سمعت أبا عبد الله عليه السلام يقول: إن لله عز وجل خلقا خلقهم من نوره ورحمته لرحمته، فهم عين الله الناظرة، واذنه السامعة، ولسانه الناطق في خلقه بإذنه، وامناؤه على ما أنزل من عذر أو نذر أو حجة، فبهم يمحو الله السيئات وبهم يدفع الضيم. وبهم ينزل الرحمة، وبهم يحيي ميتا ويميت حيا وبهم يبتلي خلقه. وبهم يقضي في خلقه قضية قلت: جعلت فداك من هؤلاء؟ قال: الأوصياء

Al-Tawhid, *Ma'ani al-Akhbar*: My father – Sa'd – Ibn 'Isa – al-Husayn b. Sa'id – Fudhalah – Aban – Muhammad b. Muslim:

I heard Abu ‘Abd Allah, peace be upon him, saying: “Verily, Allah the Almighty has some creatures whom He created from His Light and from His Mercy for the sake of His Mercy. Due to this, they are the Eye of Allah which sees, His Ear that hears, His Tongue that speaks to His creation with His Permission, His Safeguards over what was revealed from justifications, warnings and proofs.

And through them, Allah erases the evils; and through them, He wards off grievances; and through them, He sends down mercy; and through them, He enlivens the dead and causes the living to die; and through them, He afflicts His creation; and through them, He judges cases among His creation.”

I said, “May I be sacrificed for you, who are these people?”

He replied, “**The *awsiya* ”**.[5]

The *hadith* has **a *mu’tabar* (reliable) chain**, according to Ayatullah al-Muhsini,[6] and, of course, the word “awsiya” is another terminology for “Imams” (in addition to “amirs” and “khalifahs”). Apparently, the Imams, *‘alaihim al-salam*, perform far more functions than most people know.

Meanwhile, some from the Ahl al-Sunnah – especially the Salafiyyah – may feel “appalled” at some of these more advanced roles of the *awsiya*. They may fear that such descriptions border on *shirk* (idolatry). Hasn’t Allah said:

يدبر الأمر من السماء إلى الأرض

He (Allah) controls the affairs from the heavens to the earth.[7]

And:

أهم يقسمون رحمت ربك نحن قسمنا بينهم معيشتهم في الحياة الدنيا

Is it they who distribute the mercy of your Lord? We distribute among them their livelihood in the life of this world.[8]

But, these verses do not contradict the above Shi’i *hadiths*. It is still Allah Who controls and distributes everything. He only controls and distributes *through* the Imam. The Imam himself is merely an automaton in this affair: he only follows Allah’s Orders. He has no personal input, opinion or choice, and cannot decide anything even in his own favour or avert any danger or harm decreed against him[9]. Moreover, since he merely robotically carries out orders, the actions of the *khalifah* are in essence those of Allah.

The Qur’an too has confirmed that our Lord controls our affairs and distributes His mercy among us

through some intermediaries:

> فالمدبرات أمرا

And (I swear by) **THOSE WHO CONTROL** by Command.[10]

Al-Hafiz Ibn Kathir (d. 774 H) has this to say under the *ayah*:

> وقوله : {فالمدبرات أمرا} قال علي ، ومجاهد ، وعطاء ، وأبو صالح ، والحسن ، وقتادة ، والربيع بن أنس ، والسدي : هي الملائكة ـ زاد الحسن : تدبر الأمر من السماء إلى الأرض. يعني : بأمر ربها عز وجل. ولم يختلفوا في هذا

His Statement:{And [I swear by] those who control by Command} 'Ali, Mujahid, 'A□a, Abu Salih, al-Hasan, Qatadah. Al-Rabi' b. Anas, and al-Suddi said: "**They are the angels**". Al-Hasan added: "**They control the affairs from the heavens to the earth, that is, by the Command of their Lord, the Almighty.**" They (i.e. the *'ulama*) do NOT disagree on this.[11]

Imam Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 H) also submits:

> والمقصود : أن الله سبحانه وكل بالعالم العلوي والسفلي ملائكة فهي تدبر أمر العالم بإذنه ومشيئته وأمره فلهذا يضيف التدبير إلى الملائكة تارة لكونهم هم المباشرين للتدبير كقوله{ فالمدبرات أمرا}

The meaning is: that Allah, Glorified be He, has put angels in charge of the world, the highest and the lowest. **So, they control the affairs of the world by His Permission, Wish and Command**. This is why control is attributed to the angels at a place because **they are those in direct control**, like His Statement {And [I swear by] those who control by Command}.[12]

So, it is the angels who control the affairs of the earth by the Command of Allah. However, their actions are also those of our Lord, since they are based strictly upon His Orders.

We also read this verse:

> فالمقسمات أمرا

And (I swear by) **THOSE WHO DISTRIBUTE** by Command.[13]

The two Jalals say:

فالمقسمات أمرا } الملائكة تقسم الأرزاق والأمطار وغيرها بين البلاد والعباد {

{And [I swear by] those who distribute by Command} **the angels who distribute the provisions, the rains and others** among the towns and creatures.[14]

A prominent Salafi authority, Shaykh Abu Bakr al-Jazairi, has the same exegesis:

فالمقسمات أمرا :أي الملائكة تقسم بأمر ربها الأرزاق والأمطار وغيرها بين العباد.

{And [I swear by] those who distribute by Command}: **that is the angels. They distribute the provisions, the rains, and others** among the servants (of Allah) by the Command of their Lord.[15]

Therefore, it would not be *shirk* (idolatry) at all to state that Allah distributes the provisions, the rains and others of His blessings to his servants *through* certain other creatures of His. Those who shout "shirk!" when they hear about such matters are clearly in great haste, and in grave error.

It must be added that the angels are responsible for the creation of humans too, as well as some other related functions. Imam Muslim (d. 261 H) is one of those Sunni authorities with the relevant *hadith*:

حدثني أبو الطاهر أحمد بن عمرو بن سرح أخبرنا ابن وهب أخبرني عمرو بن الحارث عن أبي الزبير المكي أن عامر بن واثلة حدثه أنه سمع عبدالله بن مسعود يقول

الشقي من شقي في بطن أمه والسعيد من وعظ بغيره فأتى رجلا من أصحاب رسول الله صلى الله عليه و سلم يقال له حذيفة بن أسيد الغفاري فحدثه بذلك من قول ابن مسعود فقال وكيف يشقى رجل بغير عمل فقال له الرجل أتعجب من ذلك ؟ فإني سمعت رسول الله صلى الله عليه و سلم يقول إذا مر بالنطفة ثنتان وأربعون ليلة بعث الله إليها ملكا فصورها وخلق سمعها وبصرها وجلدها ولحمها وعظامها ثم قال يا رب أذكر أم أنثى ؟ فيقضي ربك ما شاء ويكتب الملك ثم يقول يا رب أجله فيقول ربك ما شاء ويكتب الملك ثم يقول يا رب رزقه فيقضي ربك ما شاء ويكتب الملك ثم يخرج الملك بالصحيفة في يده فلا يزيد على ما أمر ولا ينقص

Abu al-Tahir Ahmad b. 'Amr b. Sarh – Ibn Wahb – 'Amr b. al-Harith – Abu al-Zubayr al-Makki – 'Amir b. Wathilah:

I heard 'Abd Allah b. Mas'ud saying, "The doomed person is he who was (made) doomed in the womb of his mother, and the saved person is he who learns from the (fate of the) others." Then, he (Amir b. Wathilah) went to a man from the Sahabah of the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, called Hudhayfah b. Usayd al-Ghiffari, and narrated the statement of Ibn Mas'ud to him and said, "And how can a person be doomed without having done anything?" The man (i.e. Hudhayfah) said to him, "Do you wonder at that? Verily, I heard the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, saying: 'When forty nights

pass after the semen gets into the womb, Allah sends an angel to it. **So, he (the angel) gives it a shape, and creates its hearing, its sight, its skin and its flesh, his bones, and then says, "My Lord, male or female?"** So, your Lord decides whatever He likes, and the angel writes. Then, he says, "My Lord, his lifespan?" Your Lord will say whatever He likes and the angel will write. Then, he will say, "My Lord, his livelihood?" So, your Lord will decide whatever He likes, and the angel will write. Then, the angel gets out with the page in his hand, and nothing is added to it, and nothing is subtracted from it.'"[16]

He equally has one more *hadith* in stock:

> حدثني محمد بن أحمد بن أبي خلف حدثنا يحيى بن أبي بكير حدثنا زهير أبو خيثمة حدثني عبدالله بن عطاء أن عكرمة بن خالد حدثه أن أبا الطفيل حدثه قال دخلت على أبي سريحة حذيفة بن أسيد الغفاري فقال سمعت رسول الله صلى الله عليه و سلم بأذني هاتين يقول إن النطفة تقع في الرحم أربعين ليلة ثم يتصور عليها الملك

Muhammad b. Ahmad b. Abi Khalaf – Yahya b. Abi Bukayr – Zuhayr Abu Khaythamah – 'Abd Allah b. 'A□a – 'Ikrimah b. Khalid – Abu al-Tufayl:

I went to Abu Sarihah Hudhayfah b. Usayd al-Ghiffari and he said, "I heard the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, with these two ears of mine saying: 'Verily, the semen stays in the womb for forty nights. **Then, the angel gives it a shape**."[17]

There is this *hadith* of Imam Muslim as well, which seems to contradict the above two in some fundamental ways, especially on the question of what happens immediately after forty days of fertilization:

> حدثنا أبو بكر بن أبي شيبة حدثنا أبو معاوية ووكيع ح وحدثنا محمد بن عبدالله بن نمير الهمداني (واللفظ له) حدثنا أبي وأبو معاوية ووكيع قالوا حدثنا الأعمش عن زيد بن وهب عن عبدالله قال حدثنا رسول الله صلى الله عليه و سلم وهو الصادق المصدوق إن أحدكم يجمع خلقه في بطن أمه أربعين يوما ثم يكون في ذلك علقة مثل ذلك ثم يكون في ذلك مضغة مثل ذلك ثم يرسل الملك فينفخ فيه الروح ويؤمر بأربع كلمات بكتب رزقه وأجله وعمله وشقي أو سعيد

Abu Bakr b. Abi Shaybah – Abu Mu'awiyah and Waki': Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah b. Numayr al-Hamdani – my father – Abu Mu'awiyah and Waki' – al-A'mash – Zayd b. Wahb – 'Abd Allah:

The Messenger of Allah, the truthful and trusted one, peace be upon him, informed us: "Verily, the material for the creation of each one of you is gathered in the womb of his mother for forty days. Then, it becomes in it a clot of blood for a similar period. Then, it becomes in it a lump of flesh for a similar period. **Then, the angel is sent, and he breathes the spirit into it; and he is commanded with four instruction: to write its livelihood, its lifespan, its deeds, and whether it will be doomed or saved.**"[18]

It nonetheless corroborates the key point: that angels are the creators of human beings with Allah's Power and Permission, and only under His explicit, strict instructions and directions. So, He is the real Creator, while they are figuratively His Hands. Moreover, these *ahadith* reveal that some of the angels have a certain level of unseen knowledge (*'ilm al-ghayb*), which our brothers from the Salafiyyah often rigidly restrict to Allah Alone. They knew our statuses in the Hereafter, our livelihoods, our lifespans and our deeds even before we were born.

Meanwhile, certain Sunni *ahadith* also establish that human beings are among those who control and distribute – and perhaps perform some other functions – by Command. 'Allamah al-'Azim Abadi (d. 1329 H), the commentator of *Sunan Abu Dawud*, has this important submission concerning that:

> فمنها ما رواه أحمد في مسنده عن عبادة بن الصامت مرفوعا الأبدال في هذه الأمة ثلاثون رجلا قلوبهم على قلب إبراهيم خليل الرحمن كلما مات رجل أبدل الله مكانه رجلا أورده السيوطي في الجامع الصغير، وقال العزيزي والمناوي في شرحه بإسناد صحيح
>
> ومنها ما رواه عبادة بن الصامت " الأبدال في أمتي ثلاثون بهم تقوم الأرض وبهم تمطرون وبهم تنصرون" رواه الطبراني في الكبير أورده السيوطي في الكتاب المذكور وقال العزيزي والمناوي بإسناد صحيح
>
> ومنها ما رواه عوف بن مالك " الأبدال في أهل الشام وبهم ينصرون وبهم يرزقون" أخرجه الطبراني في الكبير أورده السيوطي في الكتاب المذكور قال العزيزي والمناوي إسناده حسن
>
> ومنها ما رواه علي رضي الله عنه " الأبدال بالشام وهم أربعون رجلا كلما مات رجل أبدل الله مكانه رجلا يسقى بهم الغيث وينتصر بهم على الأعداء ويصرف عن أهل الشام بهم العذاب " أخرجه أحمد وقال العزيزي والمناوي بإسناد حسن

Among them are what Ahmad recorded in his *Musnad* from 'Ubadah b. al-Samit from the Prophet: "**The *abdal* in this *Ummah* are thirty men**. Their hearts are like the heart of Ibrahim, the Beloved Friend of al-Rahman. **Whenever a man from them dies, Allah substitutes another man in his place**." Al-Suyu□i copied it in *al-Jami' al-Saghir*, and al-'Azizi said, and al-Manawi too said in his *Sharh*: "**Its chain is *sahih***."

Among them is what 'Ubadah b. al-Samit narrated (from the Prophet): "The *abdal* in my *Ummah* are thirty. **Through them, the earth stands; and through them, you are given rain; and through them, you are granted help and victory**." Al-Tabarani recorded it in *al-Kabir*, and al-Suyu□i copied it in the mentioned book, and al-'Azizi and al-Manawi said: "**Its chain is *sahih***."

Among them is what 'Awf b. Malik narrated (from the Prophet): "The *abdal* are in Syria. **Through them,**

they are given help and victory; and through them, they are given sustenance." Al-Tabarani recorded it in *al-Kabir*, and al-Suyuṭi copied it in the mentioned book. Al-'Azizi and al-Manawi said: "**Its chain is *hasan***."

And among them is what 'Ali, may Allah be pleased with him: "The *abdal* are in Syria, and they are forty men. Whenever a man among them dies, Allah substitutes another in his place. **Through them, He provides the rain; and through them, He grants help and victory over the enemies; and through them, He averts punishment from the people of Syria**." Ahmad recorded it, and al-'Azizi and al-Manawi said: "**Its chain is *hasan***."[19]

The truth is: *ahadith* about these *abdal* are actually *mutawatir* (absolutely authentic due to mass transmission). This is why Imam al-Kattani (d. 1345 H) has included them in his book on *mutawatir* reports, saying:

٢٧٩ (وجود الأبدال)

له طرق عن) ١ (أنس بألفاظ مختلفة كلها ضعيفة وورد أيضا عن) ٢ (عبادة بن الصامت) ٣ (وابن عمر) ٤ (وابن مسعود) ٥ (وأبي سعيد) ٦ (وعلي) ٧ (وعوف بن مالك) ٨ (وأبي هريرة) ٩ (ومعاذ بن جبل وغيرهم

(279) The Existence of *Abdal*

It is narrated through chains from (1) Anas with different texts, all of them *dha'if*, and it is also narrated from (2) 'Ubadah b. al-Samit, (3) Ibn 'Umar, (4) Ibn Mas'ud, (5) Abu Sa'id, (6) 'Ali, (7) 'Awf b. Malik, (8) Abu Hurayrah, (9) Mu'adh b. Jabal, and others.[20]

Then he adds:

وقد زعم ابن الجوزي أن أحاديث الأبدال كلها موضوعة ونازعه السيوطي وقال خبر الأبدال صحيح وإن شئت قلت متواتر

Ibn al-Jawzi claimed that all the *ahadith* on *abdal* are fabrications. But, al-Suyuṭi contended with him, and said, "**The report on the *abdal* is *sahih*; and if you like, say it is *mutawatir***."[21]

Of course, when a *hadith* has reached the level of *tawattur*, the strength or weakness of its individual chains becomes irrelevant. The sheer number of the chains and narrators alone – whatever their statuses – establish absolute certainty in its authenticity.

Whatever the case, it is our firm belief – based upon our authentic *ahadith* – that Allah averts calamity from the people of the earth, sends rain to them, gives them the blessings of the earth, erases the evils

from them, wards off grievances from them, sends down His mercy to them, gives life to the dead among them, causes the living among them to die, afflicts them with trials and tests, and judges them *through* their Imam. How all these happen is a matter of the *ghayb*, and therefore largely beyond our common understanding. This is also in addition to the role of the *khalifah* as the guide of humanity during his time.

The bottom-line is: whether the people are able to gain access to the Imam or not, he is always in the service of Allah, performing crucial roles and functions that benefit every single living soul on the earth.

1. Qur'an 21:72-73
2. Qur'an 32:23-24
3. Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. 'Ali b. al-Husayn b. Babuyah al-Qummi, Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah (Qum: Muasassat al-Nashr al-Islami li Jama'at al-Mudarisin; 1405 H) [annotator: 'Ali Akbar al-Ghiffari], p. 384, Ch. 38, # 1
4. Muhammad Zakariya, al-Sahih wa al-Mu'tabar min Akhbar al-Hujjah al-Muntazar (Majmu'at al-Rasid; 1st edition, 1434 H), pp. 27-29, # 19
5. Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar al-Jami'ah li Durar Akhbar al-Aimah al-A□har (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-'Arabi; 3rd edition, 1403 H), vol. 26, p. 240, Ch. 5, # 2
6. Muhammad Asif al-Muhsini, Mashra'ah Bihar al-Anwar (Beirut: Muasassat al-'Arif li al-Ma□bu'at; 2nd edition, 1426 H), vol. 1, p. 479
7. Qur'an 32:5
8. Qur'an 43:32
9. Of course, he has the opportunity to pray to Allah on any matter, and He is very likely to accept his request. However, without His sanction, the Imam has no ability to carry out any independent function or task.
10. Qur'an 79:5
11. Abu al-Fida Isma'il b. 'Umar b. Kathir al-Qurashi al-Dimashqi, Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim (Dar al-Taybah li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi'; 2nd edition, 1420 H) [annotator: Sami b. Muhammad Salamah], vol. 8, p. 313
12. Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b. Abi Bakr Ayub al-Zar'i, Ighathah al-Lahfan min Masaid al-Shay□an (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah; 2nd edition, 1395 H) [annotator: Muhammad Hamid al-Faqqi], vol. 2, p. 130
13. Qur'an 51:4
14. Jalal al-Din Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Mahalli and Jalal al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman b. Abu Bakr al-Suyu□i, Tafsir al-Jalalayn (Cairo: Dar al-Hadith; 1st edition), p. 692
15. Abu Bakr Jabir b. Musa b. 'Abd al-Qadir b. Jabir al-Jazairi, Aysar al-Tafasir li Kalam al-'Aliyy al-Kabir (al-Madinah al-Munawwarah: Maktabah al-'Ulum wa al-Hikam; 5th edition, 1424 H), vol. 5, p. 154
16. Abu al-Husayn Muslim b. al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri al-Naysaburi, Sahih Muslim (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-'Arabi) [annotator: Muhammad Fuad 'Abd al-Baqi], vol. 4, p. 2037, # 2645 (3)
17. Ibid, vol. 4, p. 2037, # 2645 (4)
18. Ibid, vol. 4, p. 2036, # 2643 (1)
19. Abu al-Tayyib Muhammad Shams al-Haqq al-'Azim Abadi, 'Awn al-Ma'bud Sharh Sunan Abi Dawud (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah; 2nd edition, 1415 H), vol. 11, pp. 253-254
20. Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Idrisi al-Kattani, Nazam al-Mutanathir min al-Hadith al-Mutawatir (Egypt: Dar al-Kutub al-Salafiyyah; 2nd edition), p. 220, # 279
21. Ibid

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