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Lesson 10: Reliance on Unsound Criteria

The atmosphere at the Saqifah was such that even if impartial and concerned people had been present they would have been unable to present matters in their true light. The privileges that those gathered there claimed for themselves as their title to the caliphate derived neither from the Book of God nor from the *Sunnah*; not even one of those present mentioned piety, wisdom, moral probity, profound knowledge of the bases and ordinances of Islam, or freedom from pollution by sin, as a qualification for exercising leadership of the Muslims. They totally ignored all the true criteria and attributes required for the office that are intimately connected with the spirit of Islam and the Qur'an.

This complete lack of attention to spiritual perfection and attainment on the part of those who were laying claim to Islamic rule in that decision making body was particularly regrettable, When the Helpers were gathered around Sa'd b. 'Ubadah, he addressed them as follows: "O Helpers, you embraced Islam more promptly than others, which constitutes a particular virtue, for the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, spent years inviting his own people to Islam without more than a small group coming to believe in him and accepting his summons.

Even they were unable to defend themselves, so God Almighty showed you His favor and enabled you to become the defenders of Islam. In the battles and struggles that followed, He caused your superior strength to prevail and to compel the polytheists to surrender. As a result of your efforts the Prophet was strengthened and his enemies were crushed. When he departed this world, he was content with you, and you were the light of his eyes. So lay firm hold of the leadership, for none is more worthy of it than you."[1]

If there had been any concern for the welfare of Islam and the Muslims, thought would have given instead to continuing in the way of the Messenger of God. In place of these criteria, primacy would have been accorded to comprehensive knowledge of the *shari'ah*, understanding the cultural dimension of religion and the various needs of Islamic society, and freedom from the taint of sin and moral pollution, and one possessing all these attributes would have been chosen as leader entitled to obedience.

All the discussions that took place and the arguments that were put forward displayed on the contrary a complete lack of attention to the spiritual and ethical dimensions of succession to the Prophet, so that we

find the Helpers vaunting their wealth and their numbers. If they made no reference to more fundamental matters, it was because they had a very small portion of the spiritual and sapiential riches of Islam, nor did they see themselves to be free of pollution by sin. They were thus unable to base their concept of government on exalted values.

Even Abu Bakr confesses that he is neither superior to the rest of the people in terms of knowledge or spiritual accomplishment nor immune from the commission of error and sin. Thus he says:

"O people, I may fall prey to error, just as it is possible that I will make no mistakes. If you see me deviating from the right path, compel me to return to it. For the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, was inerrant but I am not; I have a satan that besets me."[2]

'Umar recounted to Ibn 'Abbas the reasons why he regarded 'Ali, peace be upon him, as more qualified for the caliphate: "I swear by God that if your friend 'Ali assumes the caliphate, he will cause the people to act in accordance with the Book of God and the *Sunnah* of the Messenger and will lead them to the straight and clear path of religion."[3]

When Abu 'Ubaydah b. al–Jarrah learned from , 'Ali of his refusal to swear allegiance to Abu Bakr, he turned to him and said: "Abandon the leadership of Islamic society to Abu Bakr for the time being. If you remain alive, everyone will come to see that you are the worthiest of all for that post, for your virtues, strong faith, extensive knowledge, early commitment to Islam, and close relationship with the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, are evident to all."[4]

The Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali, peace be upon him, spelled out for the Companions the distinguished qualities that are needed in the ruler of the Islamic *ummah*, qualities he himself possessed:

"O Migrants, do not remove from the family of the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, the government that he himself founded, and do not transfer it to your own households. I swear by God that we, the People of the House, are fitter for this task than anyone else.

There are among us persons who have complete comprehension of the concepts of the Qur'an, who are fully aware of the roots and branches of religion and acquainted with the Sunnah of the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, and who are quite capable of administering Islamic society. It is they who can prevent the occurrence of corruption and divide the spoils of war justly among the Muslims. As long as such persons exist – and they are to be found only in the family of the Prophet others have no legitimate claim. Beware of your wishes and desires lest you go astray and fall into misguidance, turning away from justice and truth."[5]

He also once asked Abu Bakr in conversation: "What are the qualities a leader should possess?"

He answered: "A desire for the people's welfare, faithfulness to his undertakings, justice and equity in his conduct, a knowledge of the Qur'an, the *Sunnah*, and the principles of judgeship these are among the

qualities that are needed. In addition, the ruler must refrain from deceit, have no concern for the life of this world, hasten always to aid the oppressed, and regard impartially the rights and claims of all." Then he fell silent.

'Ali thereupon remarked: "Further qualities needed are primacy in embracing Islam and being related to the Messenger of God." Abu Bakr responded that these two might also be regarded as necessary qualifications. 'Ali then asked Abu Bakr: "Tell me by God, do you see these qualities in yourself or in me?" He answered: " All that I have mentioned is to be found in you,"[6]

Abu Dharr was not present in Madinah at the time of the Prophet's death, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, and by the time he returned there Abu Bakr had been firmly established as caliph. He remarked: "With what a slight thing you have contented yourselves, while abandoning the Family of the Messenger of God. If you had entrusted ruhe to them, not even two people would have opposed you."[7]

A certain narrator relates the following concerning Miqdad b. 'Umar: "One day I went to the Prophet's mosque and I saw a man kneeling on the ground. He was sighing as deeply as if he had lost the whole world and saying to himself, 'How strange that the Quraysh have taken the caliphate out of the hands of the Prophet's family!'"[8]

This the way Salman al-Farisi commented on the caliphate of Abu Bakr: "You have installed an old man as caliph, while casting aside the Family of the Prophet. Had the caliphate gone to them, not even two people would oppose you, and you would have enjoyed the fruits of this tree in peace and in plenty."[9]

It is related that one day Ibn Musattah left his house to visit the tomb of the Prophet. Standing there, he recited verses to the following effect: no Prophet, important events and discussions have transpired since you left us. If you were among us, none of these problems would have occurred. But you have left us, and we are now like parched barren land, deprived of rainfall. Affairs are in disarray. O Prophet, look upon them and bear witness to what they do!"[10]

'Ali b. Abi Talib, peace be upon him, that lofty personage whose profound piety, exemplary Islamic behavior and humane attitudes make of him a model of true Islamic leadership, addressed to God the following words that welled up from the depths of his heart:

"O Lord, You are my witness that I do not seek the caliphate for the sake of exercising rule or adding to my wealth.

My aim is to uphold the dictates of religion and bring order into the affairs of the Muslims, so that the oppressed will gain relief and the divine laws and ordinances, now forgotten, be implemented anew."[11]

If an exceptionally lofty personage, one free of sin and adorned with esoteric knowledge, is present in Islamic society, and has moreover been designated by the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, as his legatee and successor, it is totally unnecessary and inappropriate that a

council be formed in order to select a ruler and leader. In the time of the Prophet, no one imagined that his task was simply to transmit the divine message and that as far as governmental matters were concerned, a council ought to be convened to choose either the Prophet or some other individual as ruler, on the basis of public opinion. Given the presence of one who was in direct communication with the principle of all being and the world of revelation, the question of discussing who should be the ruler did not even arise.

The situation was no different after the Prophet. Given the presence of his legatees who outstripped all others in their awareness of God's decrees and who were utterly beyond the reach of all error and sin, why should anyone else have been sought out to take the place of the one who had brought the Qur'an? Government is after all a part of the Imamate. The presence of an inerrant Imam means that no one else is fit to rule, in just the same way that when the Prophet was alive no one else was entitled to assume the responsibility of governing the Muslims and administering their affairs.

The celebrated Sunni scholar Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid writes: "We recognize no difference between 'Ali, peace be upon him, and the Most Noble Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, apart from the rank of prophethood and the receipt of revelation that the latter enjoyed. All other lofty qualities and exalted attributes were common to both men."[12]

Shaykh Sulayman al-Hanafi, another Sunni scholar, relates 'Abdullah b. 'Umar b. al-Khattab to have said: "Whenever we talked of the Companions of the Messenger of God, we would say that Abu Bakr was the foremost among them, followed by 'Umar and 'Uthman in that order." Someone then asked Abdullah: "What then was the rank of 'Ali?" He responded: ""Ali could not be compared to the Companions. In fact he did not count as one of them, belonging rather to the Family of the Prophet; he was his brother and peer."[13]

Even supposing the logic of the Companions to be acceptable, the claim of 'Ali b. Abi Talib would still be the strongest. He preceded all others in accepting Islam, embracing the faith in the most unfavorable circumstances, at a time when none of the relatives of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, were prepared to believe in him. Similarly, his close relationship and kinship with the Prophet was firmer than else.

It was in the house of the Messenger that he his eyes on the world and under his supervision that he grew up. The very depths of his being were intermingled with the truths of Islam. He was the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet and he always participated in the arduous struggles against the enemies of Islam. Who then can be more fitted than him for the leadership of the Muslims? Despite all this, that position of leadership was awarded to somebody else.

When we examine history discover the roots of the Companions' behavior, we see that the relations of the Quraysh with the Bani Hashim were by no means as friendly as they should have been. The lack of harmony was apparent even during the lifetime of the Most Noble Messenger. Sometimes certain

members of Quraysh would criticize and find fault with the Bani Hashim, causing grief to the Prophet.[14]

Since the Quraysh were unable to bear the caliphate going to the Bani Hashim, they decided to prevent this from coming about.[15] al-Ya'qubi writes in his history: "'Umar told Ibn Abbas: 'I swear by God that your cousin 'Ali b. Abi Talib is more deserving of the caliphate than anyone else. However, the Quraysh cannot bear seeing him in that position.'"[16] This matter is also recorded by Ibn al-Athir in his history.[17]

The Most Noble Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, foresaw how the Quraysh would treat his family:

"After my death my family will suffer massacres and numerous hardships."[18]

With profound sorrow he also told 'Ali: *"Some individuals harbor in their hearts a hatred for you that they will not display until after my death."*[19]

We may thus establish a connection between the events that occurred after the death of the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, and the attitude of many of the Companions to 'Ali, peace be upon him, on the one hand with dislike felt for the Family of the Prophet by the Qurayshi Migrants on the other hand.

This negative attitude on the part of the Quraysh goes back to the beginning of the Prophet's mission. Although they were well aware of his truthfulness, trustworthiness and honesty, they refused to accept his summons of faith. The Quraysh thought that if they were to accept his messengerhood, the Bani Hashim would come to prevail over all the other families of Quraysh. So strong were the feelings of jealousy this prospect aroused that they decided to act coercively against him, blockading him and his close relatives and not shrinking from any form of pressure or intimidation. In the end, they drew up a plan to assassinate him, and their conspiracies compelled him to quit his city and homeland. Even then they did not sit quite; they had recourse to military measures, mobilizing all their forces in order to annihilate the Messenger of God and his followers.

Throughout all these trials and struggles 'Ali was the stalwart ally of the Prophet, his powerful right hand; in the bloody battles that ensued, many of the leading Qurayshites, filled as they were with hatred and resentment, were brought low by him. The Quraysh thus regarded him as responsible for the deaths of their leaders, their sons and their brothers, and although they lost all hope of victory over the Prophet after the conquest of Makkah and their military operations came to an end, their desire for revenge on the Bani Hashim in general and 'Ali in particular never abated, continuing to smoulder within them.

The Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali, peace be upon him, said: *"The hatred for the Prophet that lurked in the hearts of the Quraysh found its expression against me, and indeed it will be transferred to my descendants after me. Yet I had no hostility toward the Quraysh, and if I warred against them, it was only in accordance with divine duty and the command of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family."*[20]

al-Miqdad b. al-Aswad, who regarded the caliphate as rightfully belonging to the one whom the Prophet had chosen that is, to 'Ali became agitated when he saw the Quraysh laying claim to something that was not theirs. He said to them, as they were gathered in their council:

"Amazing it is that the Quraysh wish to deny the caliphate to the Family of the Prophet. I swear by God that they do this not for the sake of God's pleasure but for the sake of worldly benefit; they have totally forgotten the hereafter."21

To 'Abd al-Rahman b. 'Awf, who later planned the swearing of allegiance to 'Uthman, he said: "I swear by God that you have put aside one who enjoined the right and practised justice faithfully. I swear too that if I had men to help me, I would fight now as I did at Badr and Uhud." 'Abd al-Rahman responded: "These words of yours will sow dissension." al-Miqdad retorted: "He who invites men to the truth and to obey the holders of legitimate authority cannot be accused of dissension. Rather it is those who drown men in falsehood who are the originators of dissension and chaos; they prefer their own desires to justice and truth."22

al-Miqdad was a pure and precious Muslim, well known for his piety, asceticism and devotion to Islam.

In his *al-Sunan*, al-Tirmidhi records the Prophet to have said: "Each prophet is given seven choice companions, but I have been given fourteen, and Ammar and al-Miqdad are among them."23

Islamic government thus fell into the hands of persons who had no divine guarantee exemption from sin, and gradually the caliphate degenerated to such a degree that the whole atmosphere of Islamic society was poisoned, losing all trace of piety, brotherhood and equality, and the spiritual and religious resources of Islam were utterly lost during the Umayyad and 'Abbasid periods.

After allegiance had been sworn to 'Uthman, the Bani Umayyah gathered in his house, and Abu Sufyan addressed them as follows: "Are there any strangers among you?" "No," they answered. He continued: "O Bani Umayyah, take the caliphate from the hands of the Bani Hashim as if it were a ball, for there is no reckoning or judgement to be feared in the hereafter; there is no paradise and no hell, no judgement and no resurrection."24

'Uthman dissuaded him from continuing in this vein, so Abu Sufyan, who was blind by this point, set out for the tomb of Hamzah, the Lord of the Martyrs, accompanied by a guide.

Standing next to the grave, he addressed Hamzah: "O Abu 'Ammarah, the government that we conquered by the sword is today a plaything in the hands of our slaves." Then he kicked the side of the tomb.25

'Ali asked the person who was reporting to him the doings at the Saqifah and the discussions of the Migrants and the Helpers: "What privilege do the Quraysh claim entitles them to the caliphate?" He answered: "They say they are the family tree of the Prophet and related to him." 'Ali then remarked:

"They make mention of the tree, but destroy the fruit of the tree. If they are worthy of the caliphate because they are branches of that tree, I am its fruit, the cousin of Cod's Messenger. Why do they oppose me in this matter and why is the caliphate not mine?"[26]

In expounding the exclusive relationship he had with the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, and the care that the Prophet lavished on his upbringing, 'Ali said the following:

"You must certainly be aware of my closeness to the Prophet, my kinship with him, and the rank I enjoyed in his sight. When I was a child, he supervised my upbringing in his own house, I touched the body of the Prophet and I can still remember its scent He would put food in my mouth. He never heard a lie from me nor did he ever see guile and hypocrisy from me. I followed and imitated him in all matters so closely that my footsteps were placed in his. Every day he displayed his noble qualities and virtues to me, thus advancing me to ever higher degrees. He would take me with him to Mount Hira and unveil truths to me. At that time, the only Muslim house was that of the Prophet and Khadijah, and I was the third member of that house. I saw the light of divine revelation and I inhaled the scent of prophethood."[27]

Although the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, regarded the matter of government and leadership as dependent on God's will and choice, not even awarding himself any choice in the matter, a group of men made up a set of criteria which they claimed gave them prior claim to leadership. It was as if the question of succession to the Prophet could be resolved by referring exclusively to tribal considerations and unimportant distinctions that were utterly unconnected with the exalted values of Islam.

Muhammad b. Muslim al-Zuhri relates: "When the Most Noble Messenger went to the Bani Amir to invite them to Islam, a man by the name of Bayharah said: 'By God, if this young man allies himself with me, with his help I can conquer all the Arabs.' Then he turned to the Prophet and asked: 'If we accept all your commands and you conquer your enemies with our help, do you promise that after your death rule will pass to us?' The Most Noble Messenger answered: 'The matter of government belongs to God; He will appoint to rule whomsoever He wills.' The man replied: 'Are we to endanger ourselves defending you against your enemies only to see rule passing to others?'"[28]

1. Ibn Qutaybah, al-Imamah wa al-Siyasah, Vol. I, p. 5.
2. Ibn Hisham, al-Sirah, Vol. IV, p.34; Ibn Kathir, al-Bidayah, Vol. VI, p. 303; Ibn al-Athir, al-Kamil, Vol. II, p. 129. al-Tabari, Tarikh, Vol. II, p. 460.
3. Ibn Abi'l-Hadid, Sharh, Vol. III, p. 107.
4. Ibn Qutaybah, al-Imamah wa al-Siyasah, Vol. I, p. 16.
5. al-Tabarsi, al-Ihtijaj, Vol. I, p.96.
6. al-Tabari, Tarikh, Vol. I, p. 159.
7. Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid, Sharh, Vol. VI, p.5.
8. al-Ya'qubi, al-Tarikh, vol. II, p. 114.
9. Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid, Sharh ., Vol. II, p. 131, Vol. VI, p. 17.
10. Ibid.
11. al-Tabarsi, al-Ihtijaj, Vol. I, p.253.

12. Ibn Abi' l-Hadid, Sharh, Vol. IV, p.520.
13. al-Qunduzi, Yanabi' al-Mawaddah, p.253.
14. Ibid., pp. 156-57, 222.
15. Ibid., p. 373; Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid, Sharh ., Vol. III, p.283.
16. Tarikh, Vol. II, p. 137.
17. Ibn al-Athir, al-Kamil, Vol. III, pp. 24-25.
18. al-Qunduzi, Yanabi' al-Mawaddah, p. 111.
19. al-Muttaqi al-Hindi, Kanz al-'Ummal, Vol. VI, p.408.
20. al-Qunduzi, Yanabi' al-Mawaddah, pp. 226-53.
21. al-Ya'qubi, al-Tarikh, Vol. II, p. 137.
22. Ibn Abi'l-Hadid, Sharh., Vol. II, pp. 411-12.
23. al-Tirmidhi, Jami'al-Sahih, Vol. V, p.329.
24. Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid, Sharh, Vol. II, p.411.
25. Abd al-Fattah Abd al-Maqsud, al-Imam 'Ali, Vol. I, p.287.
26. al-Radi, Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 64.
27. Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid, Sharh, Vol. III, p. 224.
28. al-Tabari, Tarikh, Vol. II, p.84.

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