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The Term Shi'a in Qur'an and Hadith

بِسْمِ اللَّـهِ الرَّحْمَـٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The word "Shi'a"means "followers; members of party". As such, the term "Shi'a"alone has no negative or positive meaning unless we specify the leader of the party. If one is a Shi'a (follower) of the most righteous servants, then there is nothing wrong with being Shi'a, specially if the leader of such party has been assigned by Allah.

On the other hand, if one becomes the Shi'a a tyrant or a wrong-doer, he shall meet with the fate of his leader. In fact, Qur'an indicates that on the day of Judgment people will come in groups, and each group has its leader in front of it. Allah, to whom belong Might and Majesty, said:

One day We shall call every group of people by their respective Imams. (***Qur'an 17:71***)

In the day of judgment, the destiny of the "followers"of each group highly depends on the destiny of his Imam (provided that they really followed that Imam). Allah mentioned in Qur'an that there are two types of Imams. Some Imams are those who invite people to Hell fire. They are tyrannical leaders of each era (like Pharaoh, etc.):

And We made them (but) Imams inviting to the Fire; and on the Day of Judgment no help shall they find. In this world We continued to curse them; and on the Day of Judgment they will be among the hateful. (***Qur'an 28:41-42***).

Certainly, being the members of the parties of such Satanic Imams has been severely denounced in Qur'an, and the followers of such parties will meet the fate of their leaders. However, Qur'an also reminds that there are Imams who are appointed by Allah as Guides for the mankind:

"And We assigned from among them some Imams who GUIDE by Our authority since they were patient and believed firmly in Our Signs."(***Qur'an 32:24***)

Certainly, the true followers (Shi'a) of these Imams will be the real prosperous on the day of resurrection.

Thus being a Shi'a does not mean anything, unless we know the Shi'a of whom. Allah mentioned in Qur'an that Some of His righteous servants were Shi'a of His other righteous servants. An example was Prophet Abraham who was mentioned in Qur'an specifically as the Shi'a of Noah:

"And most surely Abraham was among the Shi'a of him (***i.e., Noah***)***"***(***Qur'an 37:83***)

﴿وَإِنَّ مِن شِيعَتِهِ لَإِبْرَاهِيمَ ﴾الصافات: ٨٣

(Notice that the word "Shi'a"is explicitly used, letter by letter, in the above verse as well as the following verse.) In another verse, Qur'an talks about the Shi'a of Moses versus the enemies of Moses:

"And he (***Moses***) ***went into the city at a time when people*** (***of the city***) ***were not watching, so he found therein two men fighting, one being of his Shi'a and the other beinghis enemy, and the one who was of his Shi'a cried out to him for help against the one who was of his enemy"***(***Qur'an 28: 15***)

...فَوَجَدَ فِيهَا رَجُلَيْنِ يَقْتَتِلَانِ هَٰذَا مِن شِيعَتِهِ وَهَٰذَا مِنْ عَدُوِّهِ ۖ فَاسْتَغَاثَهُ الَّذِي مِن شِيعَتِهِ عَلَى الَّذِي مِنْ عَدُوِّهِ

In the above verse of Qur'an, one is named the Shi'a of Moses (as) and the other one is named the enemy of Moses, and the people at that time were either the Shi'a or the enemy of Moses (as). Thus Shi'a is an official word used by Allah in His Qur'an for His high rank prophets as well as their followers. Do you want to say Prophet Abraham was sectarian? How about Prophet Noah and Prophet Moses?

If somebody calls himself a Shi'a, it is not due to any sectarianism, nor any innovation. It is because Qur'an has used the phrase for some of His best servants. The above verses that I mentioned in support of Shi'a, has used this term singular form (i.e., one group of followers).

This means that it has special meaning, such as: The Shi'a of Noah (as), The Shi'a of Moses (as). Also in the History of Islam, Shi'a has been specially used for the "followers of 'Ali". The first individual who used this term was the Messenger of Allah himself:

The Messenger of Allah said to 'Ali: "Glad tiding O 'Ali! Verily you and your companions and your Shi'a (followers) will be in Paradise."

يا علي أبشر فإنك و أصحابك و شيعتك في الجنَّة

Sunni references:

1. Fadha'il al-Sahaba, by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, v2, p655

2. Hilyatul Awliyaa, by Abu Nu'aym, v4, p329

3. Tarikh, by al-Khateeb al-Baghdadi, v12, p289

4. al-Awsat, by al-Tabarani

5. Majma' al-Zawa'id, by al-Haythami, v10, pp 21-22

6. al-Darqunti, who said this tradition has been transmitted via numerous authorities.

7. al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar Haythami , Ch. 11, section 1, p247

Thus the Messenger of Allah (S) used to say the phrase of "Shi'a of 'Ali". This phrase is not something invented later! Prophet Muhammad (S) said that the TRUE followers of imam 'Ali will go to Paradise, and this is a great felicity. Also Jabir Ibn Abdillah al-Ansari narrated that:

The Messenger of Allah (S) said: "The Shi'a of 'Ali are the real victorious in the day of resurrection/rising"

شيعة علي هم الفائزون يوم القيامة

Sunni references:

● al-Manaqib Ahmad, as mentioned in:

● Yanabi al-Mawaddah, by al-Qundoozi al-Hanafi, p62

● Tafsir al-Durr al-Manthoor, by al-Hafidh Jalaluddin al-Suyuti, who quotes the tradition as follows: "We were with the Holy Prophet when 'Ali came towards us. The Holy Prophet said: He and his Shi'a will aquire salvation on the day of judgment."

The "day of rising"may also refer to the day of rising of al-Mahdi (as). But in more general term, it means the day of judgment. Also it is narrated that:

The Messenger of Allah said: "O 'Ali! On the Day of Judgment I shall resort to Allah and you will resort to me and your children will resort to you and the Shi'a will resort to them. Then you will see where they carry us. (i.e. to Paradise)"

Sunni reference: Rabi al-Abrar, by al-Zamakhshari

Furthermore, it is narrated that:

The Messenger of Allah said: "O 'Ali! (On the day of Judgment) you and your Shi'a will come toward Allah well-pleased and well-pleasing, and there will come to Him your enemies angry and stiff-necked (i.e., their head forced up).

Sunni references:

● al-Tabarani, on the authority of Imam ‘Ali

● al-Sawa’iq al-Muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar al-Haythami, Ch. 11, section 1, p236

A more complete version of the tradition which has also been reported by the Sunnis, is as follows:

Ibn Abbas (ra) narrated:

When the verse "Those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of the creation* (*Qur’an 98:7*)*”

was revealed, the Messenger of Allah (S) said to ‘Ali: "They are you and your Shi’a.”He continued: "O ‘Ali! (On the day of Judgment) you and your Shi’a will come toward Allah well-pleased and well-pleasing, and your enemies will come angry with their head forced up. ‘Ali said: "Who are my enemies?”The Prophet (S) replied: "He who disassociates himself from you and curses you. And glad tiding to those who reach first under the shadow of al-’Arsh on the day of resurrection.”‘Ali asked: "Who are they, O the Messenger of Allah?”He replied: "Your Shi’a, O ‘Ali, and those who love you."

Sunni references:

● al-Hafidh Jamaluddin al-Dharandi, on the authority of Ibn Abbas

● al-Sawa’iq al-Muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar, Ch. 11, section 1, pp 246-247

Then Ibn Hajar provides a bizarre commentary for the first tradition, saying:

The Shi’a of ‘Ali are the Ahlussunnah since they are those who love Ahlul-Bayt as Allah and His Prophet ordered. But others (i.e., other than Sunnis) are the enemies of Ahlul-Bayt in reality for the love outside the boundary of law is the great enmity, and that was the reason for their fate. Also, the enemies of Ahlul-Bayt were al-Khawarij and their alike from Syria, not Muawiyah and other companions because they were Muteawweloon, and for them is a good reward, and for ‘Ali and his Shi’a is a good reward!

Sunni reference:

● al-Sawa’iq al-Muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar, Ch. 11, section 1, p236

And this is how Sunni scholars cope with the prophetic traditions in favor of "Shi’a of ‘Ali"! They say that they are the real Shi’a!

Let us look at one more tradition in this regard:

The Messenger of Allah said to ‘Ali: "The first four individuals who will enter the Paradise are me, you, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn, and our progeny will be behind us, and our wives will be behind our progeny,

and our Shi'a will be on our right side and in our company."

Sunni references:

● al-Manaqib, by Ahmad

● al-Tabarani, as quoted in:

● al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar Haythami , Ch. 11, section 1, p246

From the above pieces of evidence, the word "Shi'a"is used by Allah in Qur'an for His prophets as well as their followers. Further, His blessed Prophet, Muhammad (S) has repeatedly used this word for the followers of Imam 'Ali (as). The word Shi'a is used here in its special meaning, and moreover, it is not in plural form (Parties), rather the above verses and traditions are referring to a special party, i.e., one single party. If Shi'a meant sectarian, neither Allah would use it for His high rank prophets nor Prophet Muhammad (S) would have praised them.

However there are some verses in Qur'an which uses the plural form of Shi'a that is "Shi-ya'a"which means "Parties/groups". This is a general meaning of this term, and not the special meaning in singular form which has been given in previous examples. Of course, only one single party is accepted by Allah and the rest are severely denounced because they have separated from that unique party. So it is clear why Allah denounced "Groups/Parties/sects"(plural form) who separated from that unique group in some verses of Qur'an. There can't be two righteous groups (with conflicting ideas) at the same time, because between the two leaders one is surely better and more qualified, and thus the claims and the motives of the other leader goes under question.

However I did not locate the exact term of "Ahlussunnah wal-Jama'ah", nor did I find "al-Wahhabiyyah", "al-Salafiyyah"anywhere in the Holy Qur'an or the traditions of the Prophet. I agree that we should follow the Sunnah of Prophet, but I would like to discover the origin of the exact term here. We Shi'a are proud to follow the Sunnah of Prophet.

However, the question is that which Sunnah is genuine and which one is not. The word "Sunnah"by itself does not serve the purpose of knowledge. All Muslims irrespective to their persuasions claim that they follow the Sunnah of Prophet (S). Please refer to the article titled "Qur'an and Ahlul-Bayt"for a detailed discussion in this regard.

It should be emphasized that the Messenger of Allah never wished to divide Muslims into groups. Prophet ordered all people to follow Imam 'Ali (as) as his agent during his life time, and as his Caliph after him. Prophet wished everybody does that.

But unfortunately those who heeded him were few and were known as "Shi'a of 'Ali"who were subject to all sort of discrimination and prosecution, and suffered from day one of the demise of the Mercy to Mankind, Muhammad (S). If every one (or say the majority Muslims) had obeyed what prophet wished,

then there wouldn't exist any group or school within Islam. Allah said in Qur'an:

"Hold fast to the Rope of Allah, all of you together and do not separate"*(*Qur'an 3:103*)*"

The Rope of Allah which we should not separate from, are the Ahlul-Bayt. In fact, some Sunni scholars narrated from Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (as) saying:

"We are the Rope of Allah about whom Allah has said: 'Hold fast to the Rope of Allah, all of you together and do not diverge* (*3:103*)*'"

Sunni references:

● al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar Haythami , Ch. 11, section 1, p233

● Tafsir al-Kabir, by al-Tha'labi, under commentary of verse 3:103

Thus, if Allah denounces the sectarianism, He denounces those who separated from His Rope, and not those who hold fast to it! Also some said the Rope of Allah is Qur'an. This is also true. But by looking at the following tradition narrated by Umm Salama who said:

The Messenger of Allah said: "'Ali is with Qur'an, and Qur'an is with 'Ali. They shall not separate from each other till they both return to me by the Pool (of Paradise)."

Sunni references:

● al-Mustadrak, by al-Hakim, v3, p124 on the authority of Umm Salama

● al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar, Ch. 9, section 2, pp 191,194

● al-Awsat, by al-Tabarani; also in al-Saghir

● Tarikh al-Khulafa, by Jalaluddin al-Suyuti, p173

Then we can conclude that Imam 'Ali is "the Qur'an verbatim ". That is, Imam 'Ali is the Strong Rope of Allah also, because they (Qur'an and 'Ali) are non-separable. In fact, there are a huge number of traditions in authentic Sunni sources where Prophet said Qur'an and Ahlul-Bayt are inseparable and if Muslims want to remain in the right path, they should stick to both of them. (Please refer to the article titled: Qur'an and Ahlul-Bayt). Therefore, one can conclude that those who separated from Ahlul-Bayt are the sectarian who divided into sects and were denounced by Allah and His prophet due to their divergence.

In fact, the opinion of majority is not a good criteria to distinguish the false from the truth. If you look at the Qur'an, you will see that Qur'an severely denounces the majority of by frequently saying that "the majority do not understand", "the majority do not use their logic", "the majority follow their whims"...

In another verse, Allah said:

"You are the best nation (Ummah) that has been raised up for the (benefit of) people. You enjoin the good and forbid the evil…"(Qur'an 3:110).

The best nation is also the Ahlul-Bayt. Let us remember that according to Qur'an, "nation"does not mean the whole people. This is even clear from the above verse that such Ummah (nation) are raised FOR benefiting the people. Thus Ummah can be only a subset of people and not the whole people. In fact one person can be a nation. Sometimes the act of a single person is worthier than the deeds of the whole nation. This was the case for Prophet Muhammad, Imam 'Ali, as well as the case for Prophet Abraham, peace be upon them all. Qur'an states that Abraham (as) was a nation (Ummah), meaning that his deeds was more valuable than all other people. Allah stated:

"Lo! Abraham was a nation (Ummah) who was obedient to Allah, by nature upright, and he was not of the idolaters"(Qur'an 16:120)

Thus, one single individual can be a nation in the language of Qur'an. As for the Verse 3:100, it is interesting to note that some Sunni scholars have narrated from Abu Ja'far (Imam Baqir (as)) that:

Abu Ja'far (as) said about the verse ***'You are the best nation raised up for the (benefit of) people…(3:110)':*** "**The Members of the House of the Prophet**."

Sunni references:

● Ibn Abi Hatam, as mentioned in:

● al-Durr al-Manthoor, by Jalaluddin al-Suyuti under commentary of verse 3:110 of holy Qur'an.

Also Allah mentioned in Qur'an:

"O' you who believe! Fear Allah and be with the truthful"(Qur'an 9:119)

According to some Sunni Commentaries, "the truthful"means Imam 'Ali (as):

Sunni reference:

● Tafsir al-Durr al-Manthoor, by al-Hafidh Jalaluddin al-Suyuti, two reports: one from Ibn Mardawayh by Ibn Abbas and the second from Ibn Asakir by Abi Ja'far (as).

This means that people should have feared Allah and should not have separated from Imam 'Ali (as) after the demise of Prophet (S). This unfortunately did not happen at large, and therefore, unfortunate divisions followed it.

With respect to the world al-Siddeeq -- "The Truthful", there are many Sunni narrations in which the

Messenger of Allah said:

The Truthful are three: Hazqeel (who was) the believer of the family of Pharaoh (see Qur'an 40:28), and Habeeb al-Najjar (who was) the believer of the family of Yaasin (see Qur'an 36:20), and 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib who is the most virtuous one among them (see Qur'an 9:119)."

Sunni references:

- Abu Nu'aym and Ibn Asakir, on the authority of Abu Layla
- Ibn al-Najjar, on the authority of Ibn Abbas
- al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar, Ch. 9, section 2, pp 192-193

In conclusion, we have shown in this article that the term Shi'a has been used in Qur'an for the followers of the great servants of Allah, and in the traditions of the Prophet for the followers of Imam 'Ali (as). One who follows such divinely appointed Guide is safe from the disputes in the religion and has grasped the Strong Rope of Allah, and has been given the glad tiding of Paradise.

Side Comments

A Sunni brother wrote: Sunni means the one who follows the traditions (Sunnah) of the Prophet, and this is supported by the following verse of Qur'an:

Certainly you have in the Apostle of Allah an excellent exemplar (beautiful pattern of conduct) for him who hopes in Allah and the latter day and remembers Allah much. (Qur'an 33:21)

﴿لَّقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ يَرْجُو اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَاللَّهَ كَثِيرًا ﴾الأحزاب: ٢١

My comment was as follows:

1)In the above verse neither the word "Sunnah"nor any of its derivative has been used. As I mentioned earlier, Allah has used the terminology of "Muslim"in its exact form, letter by letter, in the verse 22:78. Also Allah used the word "Shi'a"again in exact form in verse 37:83 for the Prophet Abraham. However, Allah never used the words such as "Sunni"or as "Ahlussunnah"for the followers of the Prophet (S).

2)If you say we do not find such exact terminology, but we understand that the Prophet is our pattern, then one may say that Qur'an testifies that Prophet Abraham (as) was a pattern for us as well:

"Indeed, there is for you an excellent exemplar (beautiful pattern of conduct) in Abraham…"(Qur'an 60:4)

قَدْ كَانَتْ لَكُمْ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ فِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ

Notice that in the above verse, the phrase which has been used for Prophet Abraham (as) is exactly the same as that of the previous quoted verse used for Prophet Muhammad (S). That is true for the following verse as well:

Certainly there is for you in them (***Abraham and his followers***) ***an excellent exemplar*** (***beautiful pattern of conduct***) ***for him who fears Allah and the last day; and whoever turns back, then surely Allah is the Self-sufficient, the Praised.*** (***Qur'an 60:6***)

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِيهِمْ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ يَرْجُو اللَّـهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّ فَإِنَّ اللَّـهَ هُوَ الْغَنِيُّ الْحَمِيدُ ﴿الممتحنة: ٦﴾

Now please tell us if we can be called a Sunni because we follow Abraham's traditions? Certainly Prophet Muhammad followed the tradition of Prophet Abraham, yet Muhammad (S) was never called Sunni, as that result. Similarly, Prophet Abraham followed the traditions of Prophet Noah, but he was never called a Sunni. Qur'an mentioned that he was a Shi'a of Noah.

3) The word "Sunnah"has used in Qur'an to refer to the custom of God and the way Allah conducts the affairs and the rules governing the universe (Sunnatullah). But here we are discussing the word Sunnah referred to the Prophet (S), and not the rules governing the universe. As such we are looking for the term such as "Sunnatu Rasoolillah".

4) A word XXXX can be used in two ways:

XXXXX by definition

or

XXXXX by label

All Muslims are Sunni by definition, but only a group of people, which are famous to this name, are Sunni by label. How they got such label needs to be investigated though.

Also, all Muslims are "obedient"by definition, but there is no special group among Muslims who are called "obedient". This shows that having a certain characteristic by definition does not force us to specify such characteristic in our label. In fact, in most cases (not all cases) the label is just a stereotype and does not reflect the real attributes of the holder of such label.

Sometime the label is used to allure people to specific version of something which is found in various versions, each of which is claimed to be genuine one, by different groups. As such, it wouldn't be an

intelligent practice, in general, to identify the genuineness of something with its label.

Surely, the followers of the Prophet are supposed to follow his Sunnah by definition. But were they called Sunni when Prophet Muhammad was alive? or even few years after his demise? In other words, the question to be answered is: When did the title "Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah"come into existence in the history of Islam for a specific group of Muslims?

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