

Home > Shiite Islam: Orthodoxy or Heterodoxy? > Chapter 6: The Caliphate at a Crossroads: Abū Bakr and the Collusion of the Powerful Classes

Chapter 6: The Caliphate at a Crossroads: Abū Bakr and the Collusion of the Powerful Classes

The afternoon of the 28th of Safar of the year 11 A.H., which corresponds to May 25th of the year 632 A.D., is marked with indelible precision in Islamic history. With the flow of time, this event, and those which followed it, led to a radical political change in the socio-religious orientation of the Muslim world. It is the ill-fated day of the demise of the Prophet Muhammad, the date of the closing of the “Cycle of Prophethood” [*daw‘irat al-nubuwwah*] and, simultaneously and successively, the opening of the “Cycle of Initiation” or the “Esoteric Cycle of the Imams” [*daw‘irat al-wilayah*]. The passing away of the Prophet constitutes the most tragic moment in which two distinct conceptions of authority and power confront themselves.

The first was motivated by “eternal interests” and wanted to follow the straight path, shown by the final mandate of God and His Messenger, to its end. The second was embroiled in an intricate web of “personal interests,” seeking social benefits and political privilege in which Islam, evidently, occupied a subaltern role. This later group represented the mentality of a segment of early Muslims who were unable to replace the ties of blood with the ties of faith.¹

Historians explain that the death of the Prophet and the issue of his succession led to plots, intrigues, alliances, underground opposition, and corrupt forms of collusions. According to these academics, they were all provoked by the powerful representatives of the dominant class whose differences with ‘Alī were motivated by political ambition from the very beginning.

This interpretation, however, is far too simplistic when we consider the rivalry between the two factions, the emigrants [*muhajirīn*] and the allies [*ansār*].² The first, long accustomed to strong tribal authority, treaties, and blood-ties, wanted to maintain some of the political privileges and ancient social considerations abolished by Islam. They wanted to take advantage of the Prophet’s death to reclaim power by appointing a Caliph who would be loyal to them: Abū Bakr.

The appointment of ‘Alī as successor, however, came from a divine mandate. Unlike the opportunistic

and orchestrated election of Abū Bakr, 'Alī's investiture was rooted in the historical event of Ghadīr. In the 11th year of the Hijrah, the Prophet made a solemn pilgrimage to Makkah, known as *Hajjat al-wad'ī'* [the Farewell Pilgrimage].³

During his return, he stopped on the 18th of *Dhul-Hijjah* at the pond of Ghadīr Khumm in front of 120,000 Muslims. Shī'ite commentators point to the event of Ghadīr as the definitive proof, not only of the fulfillment of the Prophet's mission, but of God's permanent commitment to the preservation of Islām by the concession of a *wilāyah* to His Final Messenger.⁴ The perfection and completion of Islām was conditioned and dependent on the designation of the Prophet's successor for, as we read in the Qur'ān [5:3], the Messenger and the guidance go hand and hand. As a result, both the Prophethood and the Imāmate must follow the same path.

Zayd ibn al-Arqam relates that “the first to visit and congratulate 'Alī were Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, Talhah, and Zubayr: the congratulations and the *bay'ah* [oaths of loyalty] continued until sunset.⁵ What stands out from this and other trustworthy and authentic Sunnī traditions is that when the Prophet publicly appointed 'Alī as his successor and executor, placing his *wilāyah* in his descendants, neither Abū Bakr nor 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb, who ended up preceding 'Alī in the succession of the historical Caliphate, contested the matter nor did they have the audacity to claim any special rights. Abū Bakr never insisted upon his superiority over 'Alī.

He never claimed to have more right to rule over the Muslims and for them to obey him. To be precise, the event that unleashed an endless series of internal division, known by Arab historians as the *fitnah* [insubordination / sedition], came quite unexpectedly. It coincides with Abū Bakr, the son of Abū Quhāfah, being illegitimately appointed as the successor of the Prophet. His appointment took place through the collusion of powerful interests. It was they who granted him the leadership of the Islāmic community by means of a pre-Islāmic consultative assembly [*shūrā*].⁶

When commenting on this practice, Modernist Sunnī scholars commonly claim that Abū Bakr was recognized as Caliph through a “democratic” election, based on the decision and consensus of a majority.⁷ This gives the false impression that this ancient form of consultation is comparable to the modern democratic systems found in the Western world. It must be recalled, though, that the people did not participate in this elective act in the political sense that we understand it today. Quite the opposite was true.

The people were completely excluded from the process, including 'Alī, his Family and the closest Companions of the Prophet.⁸ The *shūrā* [a fundamental organism of the pre-Islāmic constitutional system] that was convoked in the *saqāfah* was limited to the council of tribal chiefs exclusively composed of the dominant classes who were open and organized enemies of 'Alī.⁹

As a result of these events, the Islāmic Caliphate, the first *de facto* Islāmic government, the highest and most important religious and political institution in the Sunnī world, begins when Abū Bakr decides to

take personal power. As Caliph, Abū Bakr assumes the role of leading and governing the rest of Muslims in accord with a sovereign authority and jurisdiction which, until the time of the Prophet's death, was expressed in his culmination of the Prophethood. While the Prophet lived, the Caliphate was, in the person of Muhammad, a holy and indivisible entity.

After his death, though, ambitions became impatient. The result was the rupture of what, by divine design, was inseparable, the Prophethood and the *wilāyah*, the Caliphate and the Imāmate, which were meant to go hand in hand, since there can never be one without the other.¹⁰ It was for this reason that the Prophet said in the Tradition of Ghadīr, “to whomsoever I was the lord and master ‘Alī is your lord and master.”¹¹

The initiatory role and function of the Caliphate and the Imāmate are the same. They are characteristic of the spiritual authority and the temporal power of the Imām. They are non-transferable and cannot be subjected to the ballot box. When we say that the functions of the Imām are “non-transferable” we specifically mean that these powers and functions are not at the reach of unqualified individuals. Spiritual and political leadership is not available to all.

They cannot be seized by force or by consensus. The powers in question are exclusive. They are superior by their very nature. They are divine by origin and not by artifice. The Imāmate requires an individual with exceptional perfection and cannot be shared with all individuals.

Abū Bakr's attitude and actions forever destroyed the esoteric foundation of the succession of the Prophet. Concerned more with justifying his own personal superiority, he constantly stressed that consensus was indispensable when it came to continuing the exoteric work of the Prophet. This is the reason why, according to some later Sunnī commentaries, it is often asserted that Abū Bakr was selected Caliph because the Prophet had not clearly designated a successor. The truth, however, is altogether different.

Although some Sunnī scholars admit that the most important traditional sources contain numerous testimonies that manifest, with great clarity, the legitimate rights of succession of ‘Alī, they insist, nonetheless, that the Prophet may very well have changed his mind at the last minute and finally decided to place Abū Bakr in the place of ‘Alī.¹²

We must remember that, according to the clearest and most unanimous accounts, there is no indication whatsoever that the Prophet changed his mind regarding ‘Alī or did anything to retract his previous decision, annulling, canceling, or removing his primary rank as a member of the Prophetic Household. If he had changed his mind, he would have made it known publicly in front of all Muslims with the same clarity and precision that he had used previously to proclaim ‘Alī as the head of the community at Ghadīr Khumm.

It was well-known by all Muslims of the time that the Prophet never acted out of haste. His decisions were well-meditated upon. What certain Sunnī commentators seem to forget, or fail to take into

consideration, is the consequence of the ultimate mandate of God to His Messenger in the moment that the following *āyāt* was revealed: “And today I have perfected your religion and have chosen Islām as your religion.” [4:3].

While some Sunnī commentators defend the superiority of Abū Bakr due to the respect he received from some of the Prophet's Companions, there are numerous clear accounts concerning the superiority of 'Alī. Any educated individual, who objectively examines the circumstances surrounding the death of the Prophet, can only conclude that 'Alī was the victim of a political plot. He was the victim of a conspiracy aimed at denying him the legitimate exercise of his political functions as Spiritual Magistrate as Caliph and Imām. In this light, is it not significant that Abū Bakr changed the name of his post, calling himself “Caliph”—in the sense of “substitute” and not “successor”—as opposed to Imām?13

On the basis of the aforementioned, we cannot come to a favorable conclusion to support the superiority of Abū Bakr. If we stick objectively to the reports found in traditional primary sources, we must address the metaphysical and esoteric reasons for 'Alī's appointment as the successor of the Prophet. It was at Ghadīr Khumm where Muhammad transmitted his *wilāyah* [guardianship] as an exoteric personification of temporal power and a representation of the esoteric unity and universality of the spiritual authority.

Certain Orientalists, who focus exclusively on superficial interpretations, may indeed admit the superiority of 'Alī. However, they view the whole question as a political dispute among two factions struggling for the succession of the Prophet which resulted in the victory of Abū Bakr. Similarly, when studying the prophetic traditions, many Sunnī commentators deny or fail to recognize the status of 'Alī and his Imāmate as a continuation of the personal primacy of the Prophet.

The same selective blindness regarding the status of 'Alī, however, does not occur among Sūfi sages. In Sūfism, one aspect does not exclude the other. As a result, both exoterically and esoterically, Abū Bakr and 'Alī ibn Abū Tālib can be seen as the *arkān* or pillars of Islām. For Sūfism, 'Alī, as founder of the founder of the *wilāyah* [guardianship], legatee and living preserver, present at all times, continues to be the spiritual foundation of Islāmic gnosis due to his innate dignity and power as *qutb al-aqtāb* [the Pole of the Spiritual Poles].

Abū Bakr, on the other hand, is the visible foundation of the religion due to the powers that were conferred upon him through the consensus of the Companions. For Sūfism, they both fulfill this function simultaneously: both Abū Bakr and 'Alī ibn Abū Tālib are the pillars of the religion in its external and formal manifestations. The interesting thing, however, is that for the Sūfis, the First Imām of the Shī'ites is the Pillar of all Pillars, even of Abū Bakr, in the sense that upon the death of the Prophet he assumed all of his functions and prerogatives.

Sūfism, as is well-known, contains formulations that are more esoteric than exoteric. It should not be overlooked that the very establishment of Sūfism in the Sunnī world is the result of the unbalancing action caused by Abū Bakr when he split the exoteric from the esoteric by assuming the leadership of

the Muslim community.

Even though Sūfism and Shī'ism are entirely orthodox expressions of Islām, Sunnis have always viewed them with extreme suspicion due to their constant reference to 'Alī as *al-bāb* or “the gate” to Muhammadan gnosis and initiation. According to the exoteric exegesis of some Sunnī scholars, the Prophet is also a Legislator, since in Islām the sacred law permeates all aspects of religious and social life. For Sunnī scholars, the Caliph or Imām is the Successor of the Prophet, but only as a partial executor of the Law as given and is in no way a spiritual successor of the Prophet.

Sunnī theologians justify the historical need for the Caliphate, as an institution, from the point of view that one of the objectives of the Prophet was the creation of a strong organized Islāmic State. For Sunnis, the Imām or Caliph must possess the following qualities: belong to the tribe of Quraysh [the tribe to which Muhammad belonged], be competent and capable, possess knowledge and virtue; be worthy of ruling men and guide them along the straight moral and religious path through the rigorous application of the formal divine laws. He may be named directly by the Prophet or the preceding Caliph or by means of “election,” namely, through designation by the elders of the community.

1.] Editor's Note: This shows that things are not much different today among many Muslims, where ties of blood, clan, and tribe, takes precedence over Islām.

2. Editor's Note: Having been rivals with the Hashimites, the Prophet's clan, for two generations, the Umayyads could not accept the supremacy God had given to the Hashimites by sending his Messenger from within his tribe. As Ja'fariyan explains:

There is indisputable evidence provided by older and recent research that there existed two distinct factions during the era of the Messenger of God. The first consisted of the Quraysh who were not on good terms with the Banū Hāshim even before the advent of Islām. The second faction was that of the supporters of 'Alī consisting of the Hāshimis and their supporters from among the Muhājirīn and the Ansār, such as Abū Dharr, 'Ammār, Miqdād and Salmān. Al-Fārsī concedes the existence of these two factions before the episode of [the] saqīfah. The extent of their political differences, which had religious roots from the very beginning, increased with time.

For instance, some of the Companions from the very early days did not recognize a role for the Prophet's sunnah by the side of the Qur'ān. This belief was the important characteristic of the Qurayshi faction. Denial of the religious authority of the Prophet's prescriptions and prohibition on the writing and narration of hadīth are clearly visible elements in the stance of the leaders of this faction right from the Prophet's days. Without doubt one can say that the Companions of the Prophet formed two different groups from this angle: those who believed in the necessity of following the Prophet in all aspects and those who did not consider it obligatory to follow the Prophet in matters relating to government and political affairs. The pre-Islāmic influence of the Quraysh, along with other factors, led the latter group to acquire power.

Jafrī further confirms that although “Muhammad's progressive Islāmic action had succeeded in suppressing Arab conservatism, embodied in heathen pre-Islāmic practices and ways of thinking... in less than thirty years' time this Arab conservatism revitalized itself as a forceful reaction to challenge Muhammad's action once again” (202).

3. Editor's Note: The tradition of Ghadīr Khumm is mutawātir [continuous]. In other words, it is a tradition that has been accepted by Muslims generation after generation down from the time of the Prophet and has been reported by such a large number of authentic chains of narration that it is impossible that they should have agreed on a falsehood.

Its authority is thus unquestionable and can be accepted as a historical fact. There is a difference of opinion as to the number of narrators needed for a tradition to be considered mutawātir. Some consider four to be the minimum required; others five, seven or ten. And yet others raise it further to forty or even seventy. In the case of the tradition of Ghadīr

Khumm, it meets the most stringent requirements, having been narrated by hundreds of reporters from all schools of thought.

4. Editor's Note: For a detailed discussion of the event of Ghadir, consult 'Abd al-Husayn Ahmad al-Amīn's 11 volume encyclopedic work *al-Ghadir fī al-kitāb wa al-sunnah*.

5. Editor's Note: All of whom broke their oath to Allāh, the Prophet and 'Alī. If the tradition "Everyone rejected Islam after the death of the Prophet except three: al-Miqdād ibn Aswad, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī and Salmān al-Fārisī" (Kulaynī) refers to kufr millah, the state of a person who is not a true Muslim yet adheres to the external trappings of Islam, then it is partially correct; otherwise, if it refers to kufr riddah, unbelief as a result of apostasy, it is an overgeneralization and must be rejected. In any event, the Messenger of Allāh warned Imām 'Alī that "The community will betray you after me" (Mufīd 210).

6. Author's Note: Shūrā is a pre-Islamic custom in which elections and votes alternate giving place to a succession of consultative councils. These consultative councils became increasingly narrow until they reached the tribal leader, the living executive chief. The only thing that limited his exercise of absolutist power was the enormous coercion to which he was subjected. Although shūrā was the method in which pre-Islamic Arabic tribes selected leaders and made major decisions, some of the Companions pointed to the following Qur'anic verses as an endorsement for its use in selecting the Caliph: "So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them and consult with them [the believers] upon the conduct of affairs" (3:159) and "those who conduct their affairs by counsel [are praised]" (43:38). According to Shī'ite scholars these verses do not refer to the appointment of the Caliph or the Imām, something which was divinely decreed.

7. Editor's Note: The Sunnī often say that in the Islamic system of shūrā, heads are not simply counted, they are weighed. Hence, they endorse this oligarchic "democracy" of the elite. As Jafrī notes, Abū Bakr's succession was realized neither through a free election in any sense of the term nor through a free choice of the community. It was simply a decision by a particular group of muhājirīn which was hastily forced or thrust upon others. Its success was due only to the delicate existing group conflicts in Madīnah. This is obvious from 'Umar's own statement...that 'Admittedly it was a hasty affair but God averted the evil of it.' (49).

The same applies for 'Umar's appointment. As Jafrī explains,

'Umar's nomination...was neither based on the method of consultation with the elite of the people, nor was the opinion of the community in general sought before the choice was made. It was simply Abū Bakr's own personal and arbitrary decision, which he wanted to be endorsed by only those of the Companions whom he considered most important from a clannish point of view. (64).

8. Editor's Note: Those who were excluded from the saqāfah included 'Alī, al-'Abbās, most of Banū Hāshim, Usamah b. Zayd, al-Zubayr, Salmān al-Fārisī, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, al-Miqdād ibn al-Aswad, 'Ammār b. Yāsīr, Hudhayfah b. al-Yamām, Khuzaymah b. Thābit, Abū Burayd al-Aslamī, al-Bur'ī b. 'Azīb, Abū Kāb, Sahl ibn Hanafī, Sa'ad b. 'Ubdah, Qays b. Sa'd, Abū Ayyūb al-Ansārī, Jubayr ibn Sa'd, Khalīd b. Sa'd, and many others. See, Muhammad al-Tājīnī, *Then I was Guided*, 2nd ed. (Bayrūt: N.P, 1990): 164, referring to *Tārīkh al-Tabarī*, *Tārīkh ibn al-Athar*, *Tārīkh al-khulafā'* by Ibn Qutaybah, and *Tārīkh al-Khamīs*. The term saqāfah refers to the roofed building used for meetings by the tribe of Sa'ida, of the faction of the Khazraj, of the city of Madīnah.

9. The testimonies that attest to the opposition and collusion of Abū Bakr's followers can be seen in Ibn Hanbal, IV, 281; Ibn Abū al-Hadīd, VI, 42; Ibn Qutaybah, I, 18; Bukhārī IV, 127; Ibn 'Asqir, *al-Tārīkh al-kabīr* (Damascus n.d.) II, 50; 'Alī al-Muttaqī, *Kanz al-'ummī* (Hyderabad 1364/1944-45) VI 397. Mu'wīyah's response to Muhammad ibn Abū Bakr (who was one of the faithful and unconditional followers of 'Alī) is interesting in that he explicitly recognized that his mandate as well as Abū Bakr's primacy were the result of a plot and conspiracy of the oligarchic sectors against the First Imām's rights of succession.

See, 'Alī ibn al-Husayn al-Mas'ūdī Murāj al-dhahab wa ma'ādin al-jawāhir (Bayrūt 1966), II; the version of 'Alī ibn Abū Tālib regarding these episodes is found in the famous Khutbat al-shiqhshiqiyah, found in *Nahj al-balāghah*, *ibid*, *khutbah III*, 59-61; Ibn al-Hadīd, I, 34; concerning what was discussed between 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb and the members of the shūrā during the reunion in the saqāfah, see Abū Ja'far al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa'l mulūk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje et alter (Leiden 1879-1901), I, 1837-1845; 1683; 1827; 2779; *al-Balādhurī*, I, 588; V. 19-21; 33; 49. It is impossible to summarize in

a few titles the vast repertoire of sources referring to the saqifah. We have found it useful to list some of the principle sources and, some of the easily accessible English sources. See, Ibn Abī al-Hadīd, *Sharh Nahj al-balaghah*, ed. M. Abī al-Fadl Ibrāhīm (Bayrūt 1965), II, 20–25; 44–60; III 275; Jalāl al-Dīn Suyutī, *Tārīkh al-khulafā'*, ed. A. al-Hamīd (Cairo 1964); 61–72; al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashraf*, ed., by M. Hamidullāh (Cairo 1955), I, 579–591; Ibn Qutaybah, *Tārīkh al-khulafā'* (Cairo 1964), I, 18: 61–72; Ibn Kazīr, *al-Bid'iyah wa al-nih'iyah* (Cairo 1932) V, 212; A. Ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad* (Cairo 1895) IV, 136, 164, 172, 281; cfr. Also S.H.M. Jafrī *The Origins and Development of Shī'ah Islām* (Qum 1989, II, 27–57); M.R. al-Mudharar, *The 'Saqifah'* (Tehran 1993), passim; D.M. Donaldson, *The Shī'ite Religion* (London 1933); Muhammad Husayn Tabātabā'ī, o.c., I, 39–50.

Editor's Note: As Jafrī explains, “The material preserved in the sources also strongly suggests that Abī Bakr and 'Umar had formed an alliance long before” (49).

10. Editor's Note: Regardless of the qualities he may have possessed, Abī Bakr's action cannot be taken lightly. He disobeyed Allāh and His Messenger, undermined a divine design and usurped temporal authority. The result was a rupture between the spiritual and worldly realms of catastrophic consequences.

11. Editor's Note: As Jafrī notes,

As far as the authenticity of the event itself is concerned, it has hardly ever been denied or questioned even by the most conservative Sunnī authorities, who have themselves recorded it. Most noteworthy among them are Imām Ahmad b. Hanbal in his *Musnad*, Tirmidhī, *Nasā'ī*, Ibn Mājah, Abū Dāwūd and almost all other sunan writers, Ibn al-Athar in his *Usūd al-ghābah*, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr in his *Istā'āb*, followed by all other writers of biographical works and even Ibn 'Abd Rabbih in his *Iqd al-farīd* and Jāhiz in his *'Uthmāniyyah*. The traditions of Ghadīr are so abundantly reported and commonly attested by hundreds of transmitters belonging to all schools of thought that it would be futile to doubt their authenticity.

Ibn Kathīr, a most staunch supporter of the Sunnī viewpoint, has devoted seven pages to this subject and has collected a great number of different isnāds from which the tradition is narrated. It is also Ibn Kathīr who informs us that the famous historian al-Tabarī, in a two-volume unfinished work entitled *Kitāb al-fadā'il*...wrote in full details of the Prophet's discourse in favor of 'Alī at Ghadīr Khumm. A modern scholar, Husayn 'Alī Mahfūz, in his penetrating researches on the subject of Ghadīr Khumm, has recorded with documentation that this tradition has been narrated by at least 110 Companions, 84 *tābi'īn*, 355 *'ulamā'*, 25 historians, 27 traditionists, 11 exegesists, 18 theologians, and 5 philologists. Most of them were later counted by the Sunnis as among their own number. (19–20)

The Event of Ghadīr Khumm in the Qur'ān, Hadīth and History compiled by the Ahlul Bayt Digital Islāmīc Library Project cites 76 companions, 69 successors, and 626 scholars in the chains of transmission, recorded in 182 Sunnī books. In addition, it provides Arabic text for 387 narrations, English translation for 78 narrations, scanned pages from 54 books and 280 quotations on the reliability of narrators in Arabic and 324 in English.

12. Editor's Note: Such a volte-face from the Prophet is not plausible. This is the man who taught that “Haste is from Satan” (Imām Mazharī *Tafsīr Mazharī*, Ibn Hayyān *al-Bahr al-muhīt*).

13. Editor's Note: The concept and foundation of the Caliphate was erroneous and, after the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs, soon degenerated into debauchery. As for Yazīd,

[He] was the first among the Caliphs to drink wine in public...he sought the worst company, spending much of his time in the pleasures of music and singing and amusing himself with apes and dogs. He himself had no use for religion, nor had he any regard for the religious sentiments of others. Addicted to wine-bibbing, attracted to singing-girls, and exposed to all sorts of vices, Yazīd has never been presented in good terms by any Muslim writer of nay period or by any school of thought. (Jafrī 174)

The Imāmate, however, remained pure and pristine, lead by the most God-fearing leading scholars and spiritual authorities of the age, the Imāms from Ahlul Bayt.

<https://www.al-islam.org/shiite-islam-orthodoxy-or-heterodoxy-luis-alberto-vittor/chapter-6-caliphate-crossroads-abu-bakr>