

Bewildering Interpretations

The scholars of the school of Caliphate are at pains to explain the traditions that mention the Twelve Successors. We present herewith, in brief, their contradictory explanations.

Ibn al-'Arabi says in his "*Sharh Sunan al-Tirmidhi*":

We have counted the Amirs after the Holy Prophet (S) as twelve.

We found them as follows: Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, 'Ali, Hasan, Mu'awiyah, Yazid, Mu'awiyah ibn Yazid, Marwan, 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, Yazid bin 'Abd al-Malik, Marwan bin Muhammad bin Marwan, As-Saffah... After this there were twenty-seven caliphs from the Bani Abbas.

Now if we consider twelve of them we can reach only till Sulayman. If we take the literal meaning we have only five of them and to these we add the four Righteous Caliphs, and 'Umar bin 'Abd al-'Aziz...

I cannot understand the meaning of this Hadith. 1

Qadi 'Iyad, says in reply to the claim that there shall be only twelve Caliphs;

"The number of Caliphs are more than that. To limit their number to twelve is incorrect. The Holy Prophet (S) did not say that there will be only twelve and there is no scope for more. Hence it is possible that there can be more. 2

Al-Suyuti says:

There are only twelve Caliphs until Qiyamat. And they will continue to act on truth, even if they are not continuous. 3

It is mentioned in *Fath al-Bari* that:

Four of them (the Righteous Caliphs) have passed. The rest also must pass before Qiyamat. 4

Ibn al-Jawzi says:

"It can be concluded that the phrase "then there will be discord" implies the disturbing events like the coming of Dajjal and whatever will come after it."⁵

Al-Suyuti has explained as follows:

We see that from the twelve, four are the Righteous Caliphs, then Hasan, then Mu'awiyah, then Ibn Zubayr, and finally 'Umar bin 'Abd al-'Aziz. They are eight. Four of them remain. Maybe Mahdi, the Abbasid could be included as he is an Abbasid like 'Umar bin 'Abd al-'Aziz was an Umayyad. And Tahir 'Abbasi will also be included because he was a just ruler. Thus two more are yet to come. One of them is Mahdi, because he is from the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.).⁶

It is also said:

It could also mean that the twelve Imams will remain during the period of Islam's supremacy. The time when Islam will be a dominant religion. These Caliphs will, during their tenure, glorify the religion. All the Muslims will collect round them in unison.⁷

Al-Bayhaqi says:

"This number (twelve) is found till the period of Walid ibn 'Abd al-Malik. After this, there was chaos and disturbance. Then came the Abbasid dynasty. This report has increased the number of Imams. If we neglect some of their characteristics which came after the disturbance, then their number will be much higher."⁸

And they said:

The Caliphs around whom the people had collected were the first three Caliphs, then 'Ali, until the Battle of Siffin against Mu'awiyah when pages of Qur'an were raised on spears. Then the people collected around Mu'awiyah, and then again at the time of the treaty with Imam Hasan. Then with Mu'awiyah's son Yazid. But the people did not collect around Imam Husayn (a.s.). He was murdered before he could gain this type of support. When Yazid died, they collected around Marwan after the killing of Abdullah ibn Zubayr.

Then they supported the four sons of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan; Walid, Sulayman, Yazid and Hisham. There was a break between Sulayman and Yazid when 'Umar bin 'Abd al-'Aziz occupied the throne. The twelfth of them was Walid ibn Yazid. After that Hisham collected people around him. He ruled for four years.⁹

On the basis of this the Caliphate of the twelve Caliphs was valid due to the people's support. The Holy Prophet (S) had given the good tidings of their Caliphate; that they will propagate Islam among the people. In this connection Ibn Hajar says, "The above reason is correct and it is more preferable."

Ibn Kathir says:

Whosoever follows Bayhaqi and agrees with his assertion that Jama'ah means those Caliphs who came intermittently till the time of Walid ibn Yazid ibn 'Abd al-Malik the transgressor comes under the purview of the tradition quoted by us criticising and denouncing such people. It is a controversial sect. The Caliphs are till Walid bin Yazid. Their total is more than twelve. And their argument is that the Caliphate consisted of Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman and 'Ali. (The Righteous Caliphate).

After this the Caliphate of Hasan was true because he had been nominated by 'Ali and the people of Iraq had also pledged their allegiance to him. It continued till the time of his treaty with Mu'awiyah. Then came Yazid the son of Mu'awiyah. Then his son Mu'awiyah ibn Yazid, then Marwan bin al-Hakam, then 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, then his son, Walid ibn 'Abd al-Malik, then Sulayman ibn 'Abd al-Malik, then 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz, then Yazid ibn 'Abd al-Malik, then Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik. This takes the total to fifteen. Then after this, Walid ibn Yazid ibn 'Abd al-Malik became the Caliph.

And if we accept the Caliphate of ibn Zubayr before 'Abd al-Malik the total shall be sixteen. Whereas their total should be twelve before 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz. In this method Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah will be included and not 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz. However, it is established that the majority of the *'ulama* accept 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz as a truthful and a just Caliph. There was complete peace and justice during his reign. Even the *Rafidi* accept this fact.

Suppose we say that we will accept the Caliph as the one who has the acceptance of all the Ummat, then we cannot accept 'Ali and his son. Because the whole Ummat had not supported them.

The Syrians had accepted their superiority but not their Caliphate. In this way they cannot be accepted as Caliphs.

He (Bayhaqi) has also written that some people included Mu'awiyah, his son and his grandson among the Caliphs. The time of Marwan and ibn Zubayr is also not included. For none of them had the unanimous support. Therefore we say about this sect that they believe in the first three Caliphs, then Mu'awiyah, then Yazid, then 'Abd al-Malik, then Sulayman ibn 'Abd al-Malik, then 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz, then Yazid ibn 'Abd al-Malik, then Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik. This comes to ten. Then they consider Walid ibn Yazid ibn 'Abd al-Malik the transgressor as the Caliph. In this way they exclude 'Ali and his son. Now this is absolutely against the belief of the majority of Muslims, whether Shi'as or Sunnis. 1025

Ibn al-Jawzi has offered two explanations in his book, "*Kashf al-Mushkil*":

The Holy Prophet (S) has informed about whatever is going to occur after him with his Companions. And that the actions of the Companions will be similar to those of the Prophet's. At that time he had also indicated the number of Caliphs of Bani Umayya. As the Messenger of Allah (S) has said, "*La Yazaluddin*" (the religion will not decline), it indicates the chain of Wilayat till the Twelfth Caliph. The Second and the more serious meaning is that after the passing of the twelve Caliphs the conditions will deteriorate. The first Caliph of Bani Umayya was Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah and the last, Marwan Al-Himar.

Their total is thirteen. 'Uthman, Mu'awiyah and ibn Zubayr are not included as they were among the Companions of the Holy Prophet (S).

If we exclude Marwan bin al-Hakam because of the controversy about his being a Companion or that he was in power even though Abdullah ibn Zubayr had the support of the people. Then we can get the figure of Twelve.

When the Caliphate came out of the Bani Umayya, a great disturbance arose. Until the Bani Abbas established themselves. Hence, the original conditions had changed completely.¹¹

Ibn Hajar in *Fath al-Bari* has refuted this.

The second explanation of Ibn al-Jawzi is as follows:

Abu al-Husayn bin Mauaadi in his book, "*Al-Mahdi*" says, "The more probable meaning refers to the Mahdi who will come towards the end of the world. I have seen in the book of Daniel, "When Mahdi will die five men from his elder grandson, then five men from his younger grandson will succeed him. Then the last of them will make a will in favour of one of the descendants of the elder grandson. After this his son will become the King. This proves the twelve Imams mentioned in the hadith of the Prophet (S). All of them will be known as Imam Mahdi."

He says, "...This affair will continue with the twelve persons. Six of them will be from the progeny of Hasan and five from the progeny of Husayn. The last will be someone else. After his death, confusion will prevail upon the earth."

Ibn Hajar says, "This tradition is without any chain of narrators and hence we cannot rely upon it."¹²

And some people say:

Maybe the Holy Prophet (S) has meant to say in this perplexing tradition regarding the future, that at one and the same time the people will be divided under twelve kings. If he had intended something else he would have described the activities of the Amirs who were to succeed him. Therefore it is possible that they will be present contemporaneously.¹³

It is also said:

In 500 A.H. in Andalus, there were six people in power at one and the same time. Each of them claimed to be the Caliph. Included among them were the Abbasid of Baghdad and the ruler of Egypt. The Alawis and the Kharijis also claimed to be the rulers of the earth.¹⁴

Ibn Hajar says:

"No one has much knowledge about this particular *hadith* of *Sahih Bukhari*."¹⁵³⁰

Then he says:

"It is not correct to say that these Imams will be present at one and the same time." 16

There is no agreement in the explanation of the above tradition. These scholars have not paid attention to those reports which mention the names of the twelve successors. For it was against the political expediency of the time. However, the Hadith scholars of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.) have recorded numerous such traditions with proper chains of narrators going back to the trustworthy Companions of the Holy Prophet (S). We mention herewith a few of these traditions.

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1. Ibn al-'Arabi, Sharh Sunan Tirmidhi 9:68-69.
 2. Al-Nawawi, Sharh Sahih Muslim, 12:201-202. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Fath al-Bari 16:339.
 3. Al-Suyuti, Tarikh al-Khulafa, Vol 12.
 4. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Fath al-Bari 16:341.
 5. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Fath al-Bari 16:341.
 6. Ibn Hajar al-Haythami, Al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqa Vol 19. Al-Suyuti, Tarikh al-Khulafa, Vol 12. There is unanimity in the School of Caliphate that the awaited Imam is Mahdi, as is the belief of the followers of the School of Ahlul Bayt (a.s.).
 7. Al-Nawawi, Sharh Sahih Muslim , 12:202-203.
 8. Ibn Kathir, Ta'rikh, 6:249. Al-Suyuti, Tarikh al-Khulafa Vol 11. Ibn Hajar al-Haythami, Al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqa Vol 19. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Fath al-Bari 16:341.
 9. Al-Suyuti, Tarikh al-Khulafa Vol 11.
 10. Ibn Kathir, Ta'rikh, 6:249-250.
 11. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Fath al-Bari 16:340 quoted from Sibt Ibn al-Jawzi.
 12. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Fath al-Bari 16:341. Ibn Hajar al-Haythami, Al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqa.
 13. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Fath al-Bari 16:338.
 14. Al-Nawawi, Sharh Sahih Muslim, 12:202. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Fath al-Bari 16:339.
 15. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Fath al-Bari 16:338.
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