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The Concept of Ahlul Bayt: Tribal or Islamic?

1. The Meaning of Ahlul Bayt

"Ahlul Bayt" literally means people of the house and it refers to the family or children of a person. In Islamic terminology, it refers to the family of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.).

What is the basis of the importance given to the Ahlul Bayt of the Prophet? Is there anything about it in the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet? Or is this an old Arab tribal concept with no basis in Islamic sources? The Qur'an and the hadith have a lot to say about the Ahlul Bayt. However, before we even go to the Qur'an, a clarification on the concept of Ahlul Bayt is necessary.

The term "family of the prophet" can be applied on three kinds of relationships:

- Those who are related to the prophet by blood or marriage ties only.
- Those who are related to the prophet by soul and spirit only.
- Those who are related to the prophet by blood or marriage ties as well as by soul and spirit.

When the Qur'an or the Prophet uses the term "Ahlul Bayt", it could not be the first or the second group.

The first group is only physically related to the Prophet but not spiritually, like the son of Prophet Nuh or the wife of Prophet Lut or Abu Lahab, the Prophet's uncle. Allah clearly says to Prophet Nuh about his son: "*Innahu laysa min ahlik* – He is not of your family." (11:45–46) That is, he is not one of your spiritual family; he is only physically related to you. Lut's wife and the Prophet's uncle, Abu Lahab, both are counted as people of the Hell-Fire.

The second category is considered "Ahlul Bayt" only in a metaphorical sense, not in the real meaning; for example, Salman al-Farsi about whom the Prophet said, "Salman is from us, the Ahlul Bayt." This leaves us with the third group.

2. Who Are the "Ahlul Bayt"?

Many people were related to the Prophet both by blood and marriage as well as by soul and spirit. But the term "Ahlul Bayt" as used by the Qur'an and the Prophet does not apply to all of them. We see that Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) clearly applied the Qur'anic term "Ahlul Bayt" to four people: Fatima, 'Ali, Hasan and Husayn (peace be upon them all).

The **first verse** (33:33) is of purification (*tathīr*):

"Verily Allah intends to keep away the abomination from you, O the Ahlul Bayt, and purify you a thorough purification."

No Muslim would question the inclusion of Fatima, 'Ali, Hasan and Husayn in the "Ahlul Bayt". The disagreement arises in the inclusion of the wives and other Hashimite relatives of the Prophet among the "Ahlul Bayt". For example, during our time, a book has been published in Saudi Arabia entitled as *'Allimu Awwadikum Hubb Al-i Bayti 'h-Nabi* (Teach Your Children the Love of the Family of the Prophet) by Dr. Muhammad 'Abduh Yamani in 1991.¹ The order in which Yamani talks about the Prophet's family is very interesting: he first talks about Khadija, then Fatima, 'Ali, Hasan, Husayn, Zaynu 'l-'Abidyn, and then ends with the other wives of the Prophet.

Wilfred Madelung makes the following observation on the verse of purification: "Who are the 'people of the house' here? The pronoun referring to them is in the masculine plural, while the preceding part of the verse is in the feminine plural. This change of gender has evidently contributed to the birth of various accounts of a legendary character, attaching the latter part of the verse to the five People of the Mantle (*ahl al-kisa'*): Muhammad, 'Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Husayn. In spite of the obvious Shi'ite significance, the great majority of the reports quoted by al-Tabari in his commentary on this verse support this interpretation."²

From the many reports that the Sunni sources narrated, here I am just quoting one as an example. Abu Sa'id al-Khudari quotes Umm Salama, the wife of the Prophet in whose house the incident of Kisa' took place. She says: Jibra'il came with the verse of purification; the Prophet called Hasan, Husayn, Fatima and 'Ali, and he gathered them together and covered them with the mantle. Then he said, "O Allah, these are my Ahlul Bayt, so 'keep away the abomination from the Ahlul Bayt, and purify them thoroughly.'" Umm Salama (may Allah be pleased with her) said, "Am I with them, O Apostle of Allah?" The Prophet said, "You stay in your place, and you are virtuous."³

Since this verse is situated right in the midst of the verses addressed to the wives of the Prophet, some Sunnis use its position to include the wives in the "Ahlul Bayt". But the problem with their interpretation is the difference in the pronouns: the sentences before and after the verse of purification have feminine plural pronouns whereas the statement itself has the masculine plural pronouns. This is internal evidence that the statement of purification was an independent verse that was revealed on its own in a

different event unrelated to the wives.

In spite of the great majority of reports by Sunnis supporting the view that this part of the verse was a separate revelation that was later attached to the rest, Madelung has difficulty in accepting it as such. In his interpretation, he has tried to apply the term 'Ahlul Bayt' primarily to the Bani Hashim and then, in the second place, to the wives. But he has failed to explain the gender difference in the pronouns used in the whole passage.

The Shi'ite and Sunni reports clearly apply the term "Ahlul Bayt" in the statement of purification to the Ahlul Kisa', excluding the wives of the Prophet. And the gender difference in the pronouns was to show the contrast between the "Ahlul Bayt" and the wives. In words of Mirza Mahdi Puya, "While the address in the beginning of the verse is in the feminine gender – there is the transition here in the address from the feminine to the masculine gender.

While referring to the consorts of the Holy Prophet, the pronouns also are consistently feminine. For a mixed assembly of men and women, generally the masculine gender is used. This transition in the grammatical use of the language, makes it quite obvious that this clause is quite a different matter used for a different group other than the previous one, and has been suitably placed here to show a comparative position of the Ahlu 'l-bayt in contrast to the wives of the Holy Prophet."4

Another important verse of the Qur'an that talks about the Ahlul Bayt is 42:23 in which Allah, *subhanahu wa ta'ala*, says:

"(O Muhammad) Say, 'I do not ask for any reward for this (bringing of Allah's message) except the love for the near kinship".

The fact that this verse was revealed concerning the Ahlul Bayt, the family of the Prophet, is beyond any doubt. Imam Shafi'i, the founder of the Sunni Shafi'i school of law, has explained the meaning of this verse in a poem:

يا اهل بيت رسول الله حبكم

فرض من الله في القرآن انزله

من لم يصل عليكم لا صلاة له

كفاكم من عظيم القدر انكم

O Ahlul Bayt of the Messenger of Allah, your love,

Is a duty from Allah, mentioned in the Qur'an.

In your honour, it is sufficient that one's prayer,

Is incomplete without praying for blessings on you.⁵

The Sunni polemicists have tried to reject the Shi'a point of view by the following arguments: (1) This verse was revealed in Mecca when Hasan and Husayn were not yet born, so how could it be applied on the Ahlul Bayt in the sense of Ahlul Kisa'? (2) Since it was revealed in Mecca, it is addressing the Quraysh by asking them 'to love Muhammad because he is from their kinship.' (3) Some say that it refers to all the Hashimites, and not just the Ahlul Bayt in the Shi'i definition.

First of all, the commentators of the Qur'an overwhelmingly state that even though chapter 42 is a Meccan surah, its verses 23–25, 27 were revealed in Medina. This makes the first and second arguments mentioned above baseless.

Secondly, the commandment asking for "love of the kinship of the Prophet" cannot apply to all of his kin because there were good as well as evil people among them; and so one has to restrict the import of this verse to those who were physically as well as spiritually connected to the Prophet. And no one can argue that 'Ali, Fatimah, Hasan, and Husayn were not among those who were physically as well as spiritually related to the Prophet, even though he might extend this title to other members of Hashimite.

Finally, there are many reports in Sunni sources in which the Prophet applies this verse to the Ahlu 'l-Kisa'. For example, when this verse was revealed, the people asked the Prophet: "Who are these near kin of yours whose love is obligatory upon us?" He replied, "Ali, Fatima, and their two sons." He repeated this three times.⁶

3. "Ahlul Bayt Not A Tribal Concept

What I have stated above is not a new interpretation; I have just summarized the arguments of the Shi'a faith supported by reports from the Sunnis that have existed for centuries. And so I was surprised to see what the learned scholar had written about the concept of Ahlul Bayt:

"The *shi'a* took advantage of the intimate historical relationship of 'Ali with Muhammad and of the old Arab tribal concept of *ahl al-bayt* (people of the household)–the family from whom chiefs were chosen–and zealously supported the candidacy of the 'Alids..."⁷

It does not behove a person from Shi'ite background to say that the Shi'a took advantage "of the old Arab tribal concept of ahl al-bayt"! So now the concept of Ahlul Bayt becomes a concept of the pre-Islamic/*jahiliyya* era that was used by the Shi'as to forward their claim about the imamate of 'Ali and his descendants!

It is indeed sad that a scholar, from a Shi'i background, could not discuss the concept of Ahlul Bayt from the Qur'anic perspective but a non-Muslim scholar, Wilfred Madelung, has been able to discuss at length the importance that was given to the families of prophets before Islam and then deals with the Qur'anic verses specific to the Ahlul Bayt.⁸ Although we disagree with Madelung's broad definition of Ahlul Bayt we totally agree with his conclusion to that section in which he says, "The Qur'an advises the faithful to settle some matters by consultation, but not the succession to prophets. That, according to the Qur'an, is settled by divine election, and God usually chooses their successors, whether they become prophets or not, from their own kin."⁹

It seems the learned Shi'a scholar is echoing the views of Marshall Hodgson and Fazlur Rahman. Marshall Hodgson writes, "The Alids—especially those descending from Fatimah—came to be called Ahl al-Bayt, 'people of the house' (an old tribal term referring to the family from whom chiefs were chosen..."¹⁰

While commenting on the claim made by the Shi'as of Kufa that caliphate be restored in the family of 'Ali, Fazlur Rahman writes: "The motives that led to this curious legitimist claim on part of the Kufan Arabs are not very clear, except...the fact that the Prophet had been from the Banu Hashim came to be easily exploited."¹¹ Fazlur Rahman implies that the concept of Ahlul Bayt (that is, 'Ali and the Prophet were from the Banu Hashim) was "exploited" by the Kufan Shi'as to promote their claim for the imamate of 'Ali's descendants.

Who took advantage of the pre-Islamic traditions in the dispute on caliphate?

'Ali was denied his rightful caliphate by the Quraysh on pretext of the supposed old Arab tradition that leadership goes to the older people and not to those who were relatively young. 'Ali, in comparison to Abu Bakr, was younger in age and therefore, on the basis of the old Arab tradition, was not suitable for leadership.¹² So it was the Quraysh who relied on the "old Arab tribal" tradition to usurp the caliphate from 'Ali bin Abi Talib.

Who "exploited" and "took advantage" of their relationship to the Prophet?

It was the Qurayshi group in Saqifa that exploited the fact that the Prophet was from their tribe, and, therefore, they had more right to the caliphate than their opponents from the Ansar (the inhabitants of Medina).¹³

When Imam 'Ali was informed about the debate between the Quraysh and the Ansar at Saqifa, he asked, "What did the Quraysh plead?"

People said, "They argued that they belong to the lineal tree of the Prophet."

'Ali commented by saying, "They argued by the tree but they destroyed its fruits."¹⁴ The tree refers to "the tribe of Quraysh" and the fruits refer to "the family of the Prophet".

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1. Published by Daru 'l-Qiblah li 'th-Thaqafati 'l-Islamiyya in Jeddah.
 2. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 14–15.
 3. As-Suyuti, *ad-Durru 'l-Manthur*, vol. 5, p. 197. Also see at-Tabari, *Jami'u 'l-Bayan*, vol. 7, p. 22; Muhibbu 'd-Din at-Tabari al-Makki, *Dhakha'iru 'l-Uqba*, p. 55–60.
 4. See note no. 1857 (p. 1261) in the Holy Qur'an, translated by S.V. Mir Ahmad Ali. For other quotation from Sunni sources on this verse and its application to the Prophet, Fatima, 'Ali, Hasan and Husayn (peace be upon them all), see SSA Rizvi, *Imamate: the Vicegerency of the Prophet* (Tehran: WOFIS, 1985) p. 49–54; Sayyid Murtaza al-'Askari, *Verse of Purification* (Bombay: World Islamic Network, 1998) which is an incomplete translation of his *Hadithu 'l-Kisa' fi Masadiri 'l-Madrasatayn* (Tehran: Nashr Tawhid, 1997). For a comprehensive discussion on this verse and its relation to the Ahlul Bayt, see Syed Ja'far Murtaza al-'Amili, *Ahlu 'l-Bayt fi Ayati 't-Tathir* (Beirut: Daru 'l-Amir li 'th-Thaqafah, 1993).
 5. Muhammad bin Idris ash-Shafi'i, *Diwanu 'sh-Shafi'i*, ed. Muhammad al-Khafaji (Jeddah: Maktabah Dar Hira', n.d.) p. 106.
 6. For an exhausting discussion on this verse of "love the kinship", see Ja'far as-Subhani, *Mafahimu 'l-Qur'an*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Daru 'l-Azwa', 1986) pp. 17–72.
 7. Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, p. 6.
 8. See Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, p. 6–17.
 9. *Ibid*, p. 17.
 10. Marshall GS Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) p. 260.
 11. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, p. 171.
 12. See, for example, Ibn Qutayba *ad-Daynawari*, *al-Imamah wa 's-Siyasah*, p. 18; M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History AD 600–750*, p. 16. Sachedina himself says the following about wilaya: "The new thing about it was this that in the Arab culture, the Arabs were never used to see a young person assuming the leadership. In Arab culture it was impossible for a thirty year old young man to become a leader because the Arabs believed that an older person has to become a leader..." From his 6th speech in Muharram (1419) 1998 in Toronto.
 13. There were two contesting groups in Saqifa: the Quraysh who had migrated from Mecca (known as Muhajirin) and the inhabitants of Medina (known as Ansar). For the arguments employed by the Muhajirin in Saqifa see the following English titles: SSA Rizvi, *Imamate*, pp. 113–126; Murtaza al-'Askari, *'Abdullah bin Saba and Other Myths* (Tehran: WOFIS, 1984) pp. 69–95; Muhammad R. al-Muzaffar, *Saqifa* (Qum: Ansariyan, 1998).
 14. Sayyid Razi, *Nahju 'l-Balagha*, sermon 67. For Sunni sources, see at-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 6, p. 263 and Ibn 'Abdi 'l-Barr, *al-Isti'ab* under biography of 'Awf bin Athathah. [Also see *Master and Mastership*]

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