

Who Are Ahlul-Bayt? Part 1

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Introduction

According to most authentic traditions in collections of both Sunni and Shi'a, Ahlul-Bayt (People of the House) of the Prophet are one of the two most precious Symbols of Islam after the departure of the Prophet (S). There are numerous traditions in the collection of both schools that the Prophet (S) has reminded us to stick to these two weighty things (al-Thaqalain), namely Qur'an and Ahlul-Bayt, in order not to go astray after him.

The Messenger of Allah also informed us that these two weights are non-separable and are with each other till the day of Judgment. This requires us that for understanding the interpretation of Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (S) we should refer to those who are attached to it, namely Ahlul-Bayt.

Knowing exactly who Ahlul-Bayt are, thus becomes a very vital matter when one considers the above tradition of the Prophet (S) as well as many other traditions which unequivocally state that adherence to Ahlul-Bayt is the only way of salvation. This clearly implies that the one who follows a wrong set of Ahlul-Bayt (!!), will be led astray.

Considering the critical importance of the subject, it will not be surprising to see that the Shi'a differ from some Sunnis in this subject. In fact, the Sunnis do not have one voice in specifying the Members of the House the Prophet. Most Sunnis are in the opinion that the Ahlul-Bayt of the Prophet (S) are:

- Fatimah al-Zahra (sa) (the daughter of the Messenger of Allah),
- Imam 'Ali (as),
- Imam al-Hasan (as),

- Imam al-Husayn (as),
- Wives of the Prophet (S)

Others among the Sunnis further include ALL the descendants of the Prophet to the list! Some other Sunnis are very generous and include all the descendants of Abbas (the Abbasid) as well as the descendants of Aqil & Ja'far (the two brothers of Imam 'Ali) to the list. It should be noted, however, that there have been some leading Sunni scholars who did NOT consider the wives of the Prophet among Ahlul-Bayt. This happens to be consistent with the Shi'a point of view.

To the Shi'a, the Ahlul-Bayt of the Prophet (S) consist of the following individuals ONLY:

- Fatimah al-Zahra (sa),
- Imam 'Ali (as),
- Imam al-Hasan (as),
- Imam al-Husayn (as),
- Nine descendants of Imam al-Husayn (as).

and including the Prophet (S) himself, they will become fourteen individuals. Of course, at the time of the Holy Prophet only five of them (including the Prophet) were living and the rest were not born yet.

The Shi'a further assert that these fourteen individuals are protected by Allah from any kind of flaws, and thus worthy of being obeyed beside Qur'an (the other Weighty Symbol), and they are the only people who have the full knowledge of the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses.

In this discussion, we would like to explain why the Shi'a exclude the wives of the Prophet from Ahlul-Bayt, and also we will briefly discuss why Ahlul-Bayt are protected/infallible. (More detailed discussion on the infallibility is provided in Chapter 2). We base our proofs on:

1. Qur'an,
2. Traditions from the authentic Sunni Collections,
3. Historical events.

Evidence From Qur'an

The Holy Book of Allah mentions Ahlul-Bayt and their exceptional virtue in the following verse which is known as "Purification Verse"(Ayah al-Tat'hir):

إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا

"Verily Allah intends to keep off from you every kind of uncleanness O' People of the House (Ahlul-Bayt), and purify you with a perfect purification". (Qur'an, the last sentence of Verse 33:33)

Note that the word "Rijs" in the above verse has got the article "al-" at its beginning which makes the word universal. Thus "al-Rijs" means "EVERY KIND of impurity". Also at the end of the verse, Allah states "and purify you a PERFECT purification." The word "perfect" comes from the emphasis of "Tat'hiran". This is the only place in Qur'an that Allah uses the emphasis of "PERFECT purification".

According to the above verse, Allah expresses his intention to keep Ahlul-Bayt pure and flawless/sinless, and what Allah intends it will certainly take place as Qur'an itself testifies (see 16:40).

Indeed, a human can be sinless because he is not forced to commit sin. It is the human's choice to accept the instructions of Allah and get His help to avoid sin, or to neglect Allah's commandments and commit the sin. Allah is advisor, and encourager, and warner. A sinless human is still a human; no doubt about it. Some people assert that in order to be human, one SHOULD have some mistakes. Such claim is unsupported. The truth is that Human CAN make mistakes but he does not have to.

It is the Grace of Allah that attracts His servants towards Him, WITHOUT compelling them any way. This is our choice to pursue this attraction and refrain from doing mistakes, or to turn away and commit the mistakes. However, Allah has GUARANTEED to show the Right Path and to provide a pure life for those who seek it:

Whoever works righteousness man or woman and is faithful, We shall revive a PURE life for him. (Qur'an 16:97)

And whosoever keeps his duty to Allah, Allah will appoint a way out for him. (Qur'an 65:2)

It is worth mentioning the sentence of Qur'an in verse 33:33 which is related to purification of Ahlul-Bayt, has been placed at the middle of verses related to the wives of the Prophet (S), and this was the main reason why some Sunnis include the wives of the Prophet in Ahlul-Bayt.

However, the sentence related to Ahlul-Bayt (given above) distinguishes itself from the sentences before and after it with a clear distinction. The sentences before and after, use only feminine gender which clearly shows they are addressing the wives of the Prophet (S). However, in contrary, the above sentence uses only masculine gender which is a clear indication that that Qur'an is changing the individuals who it is referring to.

People who are familiar with Qur'an to some extent, know that such a sharp change of addressee is not a weird-thing, and it has been applied to several places in Qur'an. For instance we read in Qur'an:

"O Joseph! pass this over and (O wife of Aziz!) ask forgiveness for your sin, for truly you have been at fault."(Qur'an 12:29)

In the above verse, "O wife of Aziz" has not been mentioned and the address to Joseph (as) looks to continue. However the transition of the address from masculine gender to feminine gender clearly shows that the second sentence is addressing the Aziz's wife and not Prophet Joseph (as). Notice that both sentences are within one verse. Also note the immediate change of addressing from Aziz's wife to Joseph and again back to the wife in verses before verse 29 and also within that verse.

In Arabic language, when a group of women are being addressed, feminine gender is employed. However, if only one man exists among that group, masculine gender is used instead. Thus the above sentence of Qur'an clearly shows Allah is referring to a group other than the wives of the Prophet, using masculine gender, and that group includes some male members.

From the verse 33:33 alone, we cannot conclude that the wives of the Prophet are not included in Ahlul-Bayt. This latter claim can be proven by the authentic traditions of the Sunnis from Sihah Sittah in which the Prophet mentioned who Ahlul-Bayt are; and also by comparing the specifications of Ahlul-Bayt given in the verse of Qur'an with the behavior of the some of the wives of the Prophet mentioned in Sihah Sittah to prove the contrary.

What can be understood from the verse ALONE is that Allah is changing His address (which was exclusively the wives of the Prophet at the beginning of the verse) to some people who include some male members, and may or may not include the wives of the Prophet.

Authentic Traditions

It is interesting to see that both Sahih Muslim and Sahih al-Tirmidhi as well as many others confirm the Shi'ite point of view explained above. In Sahih Muslim, there is a chapter named "Chapter of Virtues of the Companions". Inside this chapter, there is a section called "Section of the Virtues of the Ahlul-Bayt of the Prophet". There exists ONLY ONE tradition in this section, and this tradition has no reference to the wives of the Prophet (S). The tradition is known as "The Tradition of Cloak/Mantle"(Hadith al-Kisaa), and is as follows:

Narrated Aisha:

One day the Prophet (S) came out afternoon wearing a black cloak (upper garment or gown; long coat), then al-Hasan Ibn 'Ali came and the Prophet accommodated him under the cloak, then al-Husayn came and entered the cloak, then Fatimah came and the Prophet entered her under the cloak, then 'Ali came and the Prophet entered him to the cloak as well. Then the Prophet recited: "Verily Allah intends to keep off from you every kind of uncleanness O' People of the House (Ahlul-Bayt), and purify you a perfect purification (the last sentence of Verse 33:33)."

Sunni reference:

- Sahih Muslim, Chapter of virtues of companions, section of the virtues of the Ahlul-Bayt of the Prophet (S), 1980 Edition Pub. in Saudi Arabia, Arabic version, v4, p1883, Tradition #61.

Below is the Arabic text of above tradition given in Sahih Muslim:

خرج النبي غداة وعليه مرط مرحل من شعر أسود فجاء الحسن فأدخله معه ،
ثم جاء الحسين فأدخله معه ، ثم جاءت فاطمة فأدخلها ، ثم جاء علي فأدخله ثم
قال: إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا

One can see that the author of Sahih Muslim confirms that:

1. Imam 'Ali, Fatimah, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn are the Ahlul-Bayt,
2. The purification sentence in Qur'an (the last sentence of Verse 33:33) was revealed for the virtue of the above-mentioned individuals, and NOT for the wives of the Prophet (S).

Muslim (the Author) did not put any other tradition in this section (section of the virtues of Ahlul-Bayt). If the author of Sahih Muslim believed that the wives of the Prophet were included in Ahlul-Bayt, he would have quoted some traditions about them in this section.

It is interesting to see that Aisha, the wife of the Prophet (S) is the narrator of the above tradition, and she herself is testifying that Ahlul-Bayt are the above-mentioned individuals (i.e., Imam 'Ali, Fatimah, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn, may the blessing of Allah be upon them all).

Another version of the "Tradition of Cloak" is written in Sahih al-Tirmidhi, which is narrated in the authority of Umar Ibn Abi Salama, the son of Umm Salama (another wife of Prophet), which is as follows:

The verse

"Verily Allah intends to ... (33:33)"

was revealed to the Prophet (S) in the house of Umm Salama. Upon that, the Prophet gathered Fatimah, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn, and covered them with a cloak, and he also covered 'Ali who was behind him. Then the Prophet said: "O' Allah! These are the Members of my House (Ahlul-Bayt). Keep them away from every impurity and purify them with a perfect purification." Umm Salama (the wife of Prophet) asked: "Am I also included among them O Apostle of Allah?" the Prophet replied: **"You remain in your position and you are toward a good ending."**

Sunni reference: Sahih al-Tirmidhi, v5, pp 351,663

Here is the Arabic text of above tradition given by Sahih al-Tirmidhi:

نزلت هذه الآية على النبي "إِنَّمَا يَرِيدُ اللهُ... "فِي بَيْتِ أُمِّ سَلْمَةَ فَدَعَا النَّبِيَّ فَاطِمَةَ
وَحَسَنًا وَحُسَيْنًا فَجَعَلَهُمْ بِكِسَائِهِ وَ عَلِيَّ خَلْفَ ظَهْرِهِ ثُمَّ قَالَ: أَللَّهُمَّ هَؤُلَاءِ أَهْلُ
بَيْتِي فَأَذْهَبْ عَنْهُمْ الرِّجْسَ وَ طَهِّرْهُمْ تَطْهِيرًا. قَالَتْ أُمُّ سَلْمَةَ: وَ أَنَا مَعَهُمْ يَا نَبِيَّ
اللَّهُ؟ قَالَ أَنْتِ عَلَيَّ مَكَانَكَ وَ أَنْتِ إِلَيَّ خَيْرٌ.

As we see, al-Tirmidhi also confirms that Imam 'Ali, Fatimah, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn are the Ahlul-Bayt, and the purification sentence in Qur'an (the last sentence of Verse 33:33) was revealed for the virtue of the above-mentioned individuals, and NOT for the wives of the Prophet (S). Also it is apparent from above authentic tradition that the Prophet himself excluded his wives from Ahlul-Bayt. If Umm Salama (ra) was among Ahlul-Bayt, why didn't the Prophet answer her positively? Why didn't he enter her into the cloak? Why did the Prophet tell her that she remains in her own position? If the Prophet (S) would consider Umm Salama among Ahlul-Bayt, he would surely have entered her to the cloak and would have prayed for her perfect purity as well.

It is also worth mentioning that the Prophet (S) did NOT say: "These are among the Members of my House". He rather said: "These are THE Members of my House" since there was no other member of Ahlul-Bayt who was alive at the time of the Prophet (S). Also notice that Umm Salama (ra) who is the virtuous wife of the Prophet is the narrator of the tradition to his son and gives the testimony that who Ahlul-Bayt are.

In the tradition of al-Hakim the wording the last question and answer is as follows:

Umm Salama said: "O Prophet of Allah! Am I not one of the members of your family?" The Holy Prophet replied: "You have a good future but only these are the members of my family. O Lord! The members of my family are more deserving."

Sunni reference: al-Mustadrak, by al-Hakim, v2, p416

Also the wording reported by al-Suyuti and Ibn al-Athir is as follows:

Umm Salama said to the Holy Prophet: "Am I also one of them?" He replied: "No. You have your own special position and your future is good."

Sunni reference:

● Usdul Ghabah, by Ibn al-Athir, v2, p289

- Tafsir al-Durr al-Manthoor, by al-Suyuti, v5, p198

Also al-Tabari quotes Umm Salama saying:

I said, "O Prophet of Allah! Am I not also one of your Ahlul-Bayt?" I swear by the Almighty that the Holy Prophet did NOT grant me any distinction and said: "You have a good future."

Sunni reference: Tafsir al-Tabari, v22, p7 under the commentary of verse 33:33

Beside Sahih Muslim and Sahih al-Tirmidhi from which we quoted the Tradition of Cloak on the authority of Aisha and Umm Salama respectively, below are more Sunni references of the Tradition of Cloak who reported both versions of the traditions:

(3) Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, v6, pp 323,292,298; v1, pp 330-331; v3, p252; v4, p107 from Abu Sa'id al-Khudri

(4) Fadha'il al-Sahaba, by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, v2, p578, Tradition #978

(5) al-Mustadrak, by al-Hakim, v2, p416 (two traditions) from Ibn Abi Salama, v3, pp 146-148 (five traditions), pp 158,172

(6) al-Khasa'is, by an-Nisa'i, pp 4,8

(7) al-Sunan, by al-Bayhaqi, narrated from Aisha and Umm Salama

(8) Tafsir al-Kabir, by al-Bukhari (the author of Sahih), v1, part 2, p69

(9) Tafsir al-Kabir, by Fakhr al-Razi, v2, p700 (Istanbul), from Aisha

(10) Tafsir al-Durr al-Manthoor, by al-Suyuti, v5, pp 198,605 from Aisha and Umm Salama

(11) Tafsir Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, v22, pp 5-8 (from Aisha and Abu Sa'id al-Khudri), pp 6,8 (from Ibn Abi Salama) (10 traditions)

(12) Tafsir al-Qurtubi, under the commentary of verse 33:33 from Umm Salama

(13) Tafsir Ibn Kathir, v3, p485 (Complete version) from Aisha and Umar Ibn Abi Salama

(14) Usdul Ghabah, by Ibn al-Athir, v2, p12; v4, p79 narrated from Ibn Abi Salama

(15) Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar al-Haythami, Ch. 11, sec. 1, p221 from Umm Salama

(16) Tarikh, by al-Khateeb Baghdadi, v10, narrated from Ibn Abi Salama

(17) Tafsir al-Kashshaf, by al-Zamakhshari, v1, p193 narrated from Aisha

(18) Mushkil al-Athar, by al-Tahawi, v1, pp 332–336 (seven traditions)

(19) Dhakha'ir al-Uqba, by Muhibb al-Tabari, pp21–26, from Abu Sa'id Khudri

(20) Majma' al-Zawa'id, by al-Haythami, v9, p166 (by several transmitters)

... and more ...

Here is another authentic variation of "The Tradition of Cloak" which is related to Safiyya who was another wife of the Prophet (S). Ja'far Ibn Abi Talib narrated:

When the Messenger of Allah noticed that a blessing from Allah was to descent, he told Safiyya (one of his wives): "Call for me! Call for me!" Safiyya said: "Call who, O the Messenger of Allah?" He said: "Call for me my Ahlul-Bayt who are 'Ali, Fatimah, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn." Thus we sent for them and they came to him.

Then the Prophet (S) spread his cloak over them, and raised his hand (toward sky) saying: "O Allah! These are my family (Aalee), so bless Muhammad and the family (Aal) of Muhammad." And Allah, to whom belong Might and Majesty, revealed: "Verily Allah intends to keep off from you every kind of uncleanness O' People of the House (Ahlul-Bayt), and purify you a thorough purification (Qur'an, the last sentence of Verse 33:33)".

Sunni references:

- al-Mustadrak by al-Hakim, Chapter of "Understanding (the virtues) of Companions, v3, p148. The author then wrote: "This tradition is authentic (Sahih) based on the criteria of the two Shaikhs (al-Bukhari and Muslim)."
- Talkhis of al-Mustadrak, by al-Dhahabi, v3, p148
- Usdul Ghabah, by Ibn al-Athir, v3, p33

Although the majority of traditions on this issue show that the last sentence of the verse 33:33 was revealed in the house of Umm Salama (as quoted earlier), the above tradition implies that it might have been revealed in the house of Safiyya.

Based on the opinion of the Sunni scholars including Ibn Hajar, it is quite possible that the verse was revealed more than once. In each occasion, the Prophet repeated his action in front of different wives so that they all realize who his Ahlul-Bayt are.

The testimony of three wives of the Prophet (Aisha, Umm Salama, and Safiyya) leaves us no room but to believe that the Ahlul-Bayt at the time of the Prophet were no more than five individuals: Prophet Muhammad, Lady Fatimah, Imam 'Ali, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn (Peace be upon them all).

The fact that the gender in later part of Verse 33:33 is switched from feminine to masculine, has led the majority of Sunni commentators to believe that the last part was revealed for Imam 'Ali, Fatimah, al-Hasan and al-Husayn, as Ibn Hajar al-Haythami indicated:

Based on the opinion of the majority of (Sunni) commentators, the saying of Allah: "Verily Allah intends to ... (the last sentence of the verse 33:33)" was revealed for 'Ali, Fatimah, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn, because of the usage of masculine gender in the word "Ankum" and after that.

Sunni reference: al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar, Ch. 11, section 1, p220

Although the Shi'a have great respect for the highly righteous wives among the wives of the Prophet (S), such as Khadija, Umm Salama, Umm Ayman and ... (may Allah be pleased with them) who closely followed the Prophet and his Ahlul-Bayt before and after the demise of Prophet (S), yet we do not include even those respected individuals into Ahlul-Bayt since the Prophet clearly excluded them according to the authentic Sunni and Shi'i traditions. Ahlul-Bayt have exceptional virtues that no other pious person after the Prophet would possess them in the world, which are according to Qur'an: sinlessness, flawlessness and perfect purity.

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