

The Twelve Imams Part 1

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

This article is in reference to the question that: Where did the twelve Imams (as) come from and why should the number of Imams be twelve and twelve only?

As a matter of fact, the answer is right inside the Sahih al-Bukhari and Muslim. There are numerous Sunni collections of traditions which all recorded the following authentic tradition from the Prophet (S). Here, for the sake of brevity, I only quote from Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, and Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal.

In Sahih al-Bukhari (Arabic-English version), the tradition is as follows:

Sahih al-Bukhari Hadith: 9.329

Narrated Jabir Ibn Samura:

I heard the Prophet saying, "There will be twelve commanders (Amir)." He then said a sentence which I did not hear. My father said, the Prophet added, "All of them will be from Quraish."

سمعتُ النبي يقول: يكونُ اثنا عشر أميراً. فقال كلمة لم أسمعها. فقال أبي كلُّهم من قريش.

In Musnad Ahmad, the tradition is as follows:

The Prophet (S) said: "There shall be twelve Caliphs

for this community, all of them from Quraish."

يكون لهذه الأمة اثنا عشر خليفة كلهم من قريش.

Reference: Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, v5, p106

In Sahih Muslim, the traditions are as follows:

Narrated Jabir Ibn Samura:

The Prophet (S) said: "The matter (life) will not end, until it is passed by twelve Caliphs." He then whispered a sentence. I asked my father what the Prophet said. He said, the Prophet added: "All of them will be from Quraish."

إِنَّ هَذَا الْأَمْرَ لَا يَنْقُضِي حَتَّى يَمْضِيَ فِيهِمْ إِثْنَا عَشَرَ خَلِيفَةً. ثُمَّ تَكَلَّمَ بِكَلَامٍ خَفِيٍّ.
فَقُلْتُ لِأَبِي: مَا قَالَ؟ قَالَ: كُلُّهُمْ مِنْ قُرَيْشٍ.

Sunni references:

- Sahih Muslim, Arabic version, Kitab al-Imaara, 1980 Edition Pub. in Saudi Arabia, v3, p1452, Tradition #5
- Sahih Muslim, English version, Chapter DCCLIV (titled: The People are subservient to the Quraish and the Caliphate is the Right of the Quraish), v3, p1009, Tradition #4477

Again from Sahih Muslim:

The Prophet (S) said: "The affairs of people will continue to be conducted (well) as long as they are governed by the twelve men."

لا يزال أمرُ الناسِ ما ضياً ما وليهم اثني عشر رجلاً.

Sunni references:

- Sahih Muslim, Arabic version, Kitab al-Imaara, 1980 Edition Pub. in Saudi Arabia, v3, p1453, Tradition #6

- Sahih Muslim, English version, Chapter DCCLIV (titled: The People are subservient to the Quraish and the Caliphate is the Right of the Quraish), v3, p1010, Tradition #4478

Also:

The Prophet (S) said: "Islam will continue to be triumphant until there have been twelve Caliphs."

لا يزال الاسلامُ عزيزاً إلى اثني عشر خليفة.

Sunni references:

- Sahih Muslim, Arabic version, Kitab al-Imaara, 1980 Edition Pub. in Saudi Arabia, v3, p1453, Tradition #7

- Sahih Muslim, English version, Chapter DCCLIV (titled: The People are subservient to the Quraish and the Caliphate is the Right of the Quraish), v3, p1010, Tradition #4480

Again:

The Prophet (S) said: "The Islamic religion will continue until the Hour (day of resurrection), having twelve Caliphs for you, all of them will be from Quraish."

لا يزال الدين قائماً حتى تقوم الساعة أو يكون عليكم اثنا عشر خليفة كلهم من قريش.

Sunni references:

- Sahih Muslim, Arabic version, Kitab al-Imaara, 1980 Edition Pub. in Saudi Arabia, v3, p1453, Tradition #10

- Sahih Muslim, English version, Chapter DCCLIV (titled: The People are subservient to the Quraish and the Caliphate is the Right of the Quraish), v3, p1010, Tradition #4483

More Sunni references of similar traditions:

- Sahih al-Tirmidhi, v4, p501

- Sunan Abu Dawud, v2, p421 (three traditions).

- Others such as al-Tiyalasi, Ibn al-Athir, etc.

Also in another wording, the Messenger of Allah uses the word "Imam" instead of "Caliph". It is widely narrated that:

The Prophet (S) said: "The Imams are from Quraish"

الأئمة من قريش.

Sunni references:

- al-Mustadrak, by al-Hakim, v3, p149
- Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal
- Sahih al-Nisa'i, from Anas Ibn Malik
- Sunan, by al-Baihaqi
- al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqa, by Ibn Hajar al-Haithami, Ch. 11, section 2, p287

Obviously, the above traditions are not fit to the first four Caliphs all together, as they were less than twelve.

And they can not be applied to the Umayyad Caliphs, because

- (a) they were more than twelve;
- (b) all of them were tyrants and unjust (except Umar Ibn Abd al-Aziz);
- (c) they were not from the Hashimites and the Holy Prophet had said in another tradition that: "All of them will be from the Bani Hashim..."

Also they cannot be applied to the Abbasid Caliphs, because:

- (a) they were more than twelve;
- (b) they persecuted the descendants of the Prophet every where which means they did not comply with the Qur'anic verse: "I don't ask you any wage except to love my family."(42:23).

My recollection about the unfortunate history of Caliphate indicates that, even from the Sunni point of view, there was no good Caliph left after the first 4 Caliphs (It would be 5 if we include Umar Ibn Abd al-Aziz. Some Sunnis are very generous and they add Imam al-Hasan (as) and Imam al-Mahdi (as) to the list as well.)

To fill out the twelve set, some even included the well-known tyrants to the list such as Yazid Ibn Mu'awiya, Marwan Ibn al-Hakam, Abdul-Malik Marwan, and Husham Ibn Abdul-Malik. The reason is clear and as I stated previously, it is due to the lack of decent and sincere rulers in the History of Islam.

I would like to remind you that "Caliph" means successor/deputy. The successor of the Prophet (or the preceding Caliph) should come immediately after the demise of the Prophet (or the preceding Caliph). If there is any gap between the successors, the word "successor" does not make any sense. So successors should come right after the other without any gap. Also as the Prophet (S) suggested in the above traditions, those twelve Caliphs will cover till the day of resurrection.

As you may know, the Followers of the Members of the House of the Prophet (S) refer to these 12 Caliphs as of their 12 Imams starting with Imam 'Ali (as) and ending with Imam Mahdi (as) the leader of our time. There are Caliphs because Allah made them Caliphs (They are vice-regents of Allah on the earth). With the passage of time and through historical events, we know that by the above traditions the Holy Prophet (S) meant the twelve Imams from his Ahlul-Bait who are the descendants of the Prophet since we have no other 12 pure candidates in the history of Islam upon whose righteousness all Muslims agree. It is interesting to know that even the enemies of Shi'a have NOT been able to find any fault in the virtues of the twelve Imams of Shi'a. Moreover these twelve Imams came one after another without any gap.

It is now clear that the only way to interpret the previously mentioned traditions which are narrated by al-Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Dawud and al-Tirmidhi, al-Hakim, and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal is to accept that it refers to the Twelve Imams from the Prophet's Ahlul-Bait, because they were, in their times, the most knowledgeable, the most illustrious, the most god-fearing, the most pious, the best in personal virtues, and the most honored before Allah; and their knowledge was derived from their ancestor (the Prophet) through their fathers. These are the Ahlul-Bait whose sinlessness, flawlessness, and purity is confirmed by the holy Qur'an (the last sentence of verse 33:33).

Also the above mentioned traditions of the Prophet which are considered to be authentic by the Sunnis, proves beyond doubt that the concept of "Twelve Imams" can NOT be a Twelver Shi'ites concoction! It is amazing that despite the acknowledgment of al-Bukhari and Muslim and other prominent Sunni scholars about the twelve Imams, the Sunnis always stop at the four Caliphs!

More interestingly, there are Sunni reports in which the Messenger of Allah named these twelve members of his Ahlul-Bait one by one starting with Imam 'Ali (as) and ending with Imam al-Mahdi (as). (see Yanabi' al-Mawadda, by al-Qunduzi al-Hanafi).

Now after reviewing all these straightforward authentic traditions which ALL Muslims unanimously agree upon, I would like to ask, based on the Sunni point of view who are those twelve Caliphs after Prophet Muhammad (S)?

Please support your assertion by references from Qur'an and or the six Sunni collections of traditions,

and also justify their deeds in the course of history. Remember that the instructions of these twelve successors of the Prophet should be obeyed. As such, if you don't know your twelve leaders, how do you want to obey them? Indeed, the Messenger of Allah (S) said:

He who dies while he does not know the Imam of his age, is like the one who died during days of Jahiliyya (the era before Islam).

من مات ولم يعرف إمام زمانه مات ميتة جاهلية.

Few Facts About The Twelve Imams Of Ahlul-Bait

The First Imam: The Commander of Believers, Abul-Hasan, 'Ali al-Murtadha, son of Abu Talib, was born on the 13th of Rajab, 10 years before the declaration of the Prophethood (600 A. D.), inside Ka'bah. He became Imam, on the demise of the Prophet on the 28th of Safar 11/632, and was fatally wounded by the poisoned sword of Ibn Muljam while engaged in prayers at the Mosque of Kufa (Iraq), and expired two days later on the 21st of Ramadhan 40/661, and was buried at al-Najaf (Iraq).

The Second Imam: Abu Muhammad, Al-Hassan al-Mujtaba, son of 'Ali, was born on the 15th of Ramadhan 3/625 in Medina; martyred of poison on the 7th or 28th Safar 50/670 in Medina by the order of Mu'awiya.

The Third Imam: Abu Abdillah, al-Hussain, The Chief of Martyrs (Sayyid al-Shuhadaa), son of 'Ali, was born on the 3rd of Sha'ban 4/626 in Medina; was martyred with his sons (except one), relatives and companions, on the 10th of Muharram (Ashura) 61/680 in Karbala (Iraq) by order of Yazid (LA). He and his elder brother, al-Hasan, were sons of Fatimah, the daughter of the holy Prophet.

The Fourth Imam: Abu Muhammad, 'Ali Zain al-Abidin, son of al-Husayn, was born on the 5th of Sha'ban 38/659; martyred of poison on the 25th of Muharram 94/712 or 95/713 in Medina by the order of Husham Ibn Abdul-Malik.

The Fifth Imam: Abu Ja'far, Muhammad al-Baqir, son of 'Ali, was born on the 1st of Rajab 57/677 in Medina; martyred of poison by Ibrahim on the 7th Dhul-Hajja 114/733 in Medina.

The Sixth Imam: Abu Abdillah, Ja'far al-Sadiq, son of Muhammad, was born on the 17th of Rabi'ul-Awwal 83/702 in Medina; martyred there of poison on the 25th of Shawwal 148/765 by the order of al-Mansur.

The Seventh Imam: Abul-Hasan al-Awwal, Musa al-Kadhim, son of Ja'far, was born in al-Abwa (7 miles from Medina) on the 7th Safar 129/746; martyred of poison on the 25th of Rajab 183/799 in the prison of Harun al-Rashid in Baghdad and was buried at al-Kadhimiyya, near Baghdad (Iraq).

The Eighth Imam: Abul-Hasan al-Thani, 'Ali al-Ridha, son of Musa, was born in Medina on the 11th Dhul-Qa'da 148/765; martyred of poison on the 17th of Safar 203/818 in Mash'had (Khurasan, Iran) by the order of Ma'mun.

The Ninth Imam: Abu Ja'far al-Thani, Muhammad al-Taqi al-Jawad, son of 'Ali, was born on the 10th of Rajab 195/811 in Medina; martyred of poison by the order of Mu'tasim in Baghdad on the 30th Dhul-Qa'da 220/835; was buried near his grandfather at al-Kadhimiyya.

The Tenth Imam: Abul-Hasan al-Thalith, 'Ali al-Naqi al-Hadi, son of Muhammad, was born on the 5th of Rajab 212/827 in Medina; martyred of poison in Samirra (Iraq) on 3rd of Rajab 254/868 by the order of Mutawakkil.

The Eleventh Imam: Abu Muhammad, Al-Hassan al-Askari, son of 'Ali, was born on the 8th of Rabi al-Thani 232/846 in Medina; martyred of poison by Mu'tamid in Samirra (Iraq) on the 8th of Rabi'ul-Awwal 260/874.

The Twelfth Imam: Abul-Qasim, Muhammad al-Mahdi, son of al-Hasan, was born on the 15th of Sha'ban 255/869 in Samirra (Iraq). He is our present and alive Imam. He went into Lesser Occultation in 260/874 which continued until 329/844. Then the greater occultation began which still continues. He will reappear when Allah allows him to establish the kingdom of Allah on earth and to fill the world with justice and equality as it would be full of injustice and tyranny. He is al-Qa'im (the one who shall stand to establish the rule of Allah); al-Hujja (the proof of Allah over His creatures); Sahib al-Zaman (the master of our time); and Sahib al-Amr (the one who is supported by divine authority).

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