

A Zaydī response to the hādīth on the “twelve Caliphs”

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All praise is due to Allāh, the Exalted and Majestic; the One who has no partners or associates; the One who provides the light of guidance to His servants so that they may attain spiritual perfection and illumination by means of it. May Allāh send His blessings upon His servant and seal of the Messengers, Muhammad ībn Abdullāh. May Allāh bless the pure Progeny of the Prophet, as well as his righteous Companions, and those that follow them in excellence until the Day of Judgment.

Introduction

This short essay is aimed at evaluating the well-debated hādīth on the “twelve Caliphs” known as “*ḥadīth al-ithnā ‘ashar khalīfā*”. The hādīth in question has been of particular significance to the Ithnā‘ashāriyyah (the Twelver school of thought) due to their conception of Imāma which entails the acceptance of twelve infallible Imāms as a point of creed or uṣūl al-dīn.¹ In an attempt to demonstrate the validity of their creed, a number of Twelver scholars have consequently produced works asserting that it is obligatory upon every believer to accept the belief in twelve infallible Imāms due to the appearance of this tradition within the sources of their theological opponents. This short essay will therefore endeavour to analyse the argumentation that has been raised in support of this claim.

An analysis of the “twelve Caliphs” hādīth

Perhaps the most notable scholar to have made this argument is Shaykh al-Tusī of the 5th century AH who is commonly referred to as “Shaykh al-Ta’ifāh” (scholar of the sect) by adherents of the Twelver school. Al-Tusī makes this argument within his work entitled “Kitāb al-Ghayba” – a book written on the occultation of their twelfth Imām asserting that the hādīth in question serves as proof for the correctness of their creed.² However, the first

¹ According to the authoritative text on Twelver creed by Shaykh aṣ-Ṣadūq entitled “*I’tiqādātu ’l-Imāmiyyā*” (the beliefs of the Imāmiyyā) it is obligatory to accept the twelve infallible Imāms as a point of uṣūl al-dīn.

² Kitāb al-Ghayba by Abu Jafar Muhammad ībn Hassan Tusī

objection to al-Tusī and those that have purported this claim, is that this hādīth appears nowhere within the Zaydī canon of Hādīth – meaning that such argumentation cannot be levelled against the Zaydī school. Nonetheless, the traditions which have been relied on to make this argument will still be examined.

This tradition appears in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī on the authority of Jābir ibn Sāmūra with the usage of word *amir* (commander) as opposed to *khalīfā* (successor) with the following wording: Jābir ibn Sāmūra reported that the Prophet said: “*There will be twelve Muslīm commanders (amirs). He then said a sentence which I did not hear. My father said, "All of them (those rulers) will be from Quraysh.*”³ However, the most authoritative wording on the “twelve Caliphs” hādīth within the Sunni tradition is located in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslīm - which is also narrated on the authority of Jābir ibn Sāmūra. The report is as follows: Jābir ibn Sāmūra reported that he heard the Messenger of Allah say: “*Islām will continue to remain in a state of glory until there have been twelve Caliphs.*”⁴ There are a number of reasons as to why this particular hādīth, as well as other variants of this tradition, do not support the doctrinal claims of the Ithnā‘ashāriyyā. The first is that there is no mention of the infallibility of these twelve Caliphs within these reports, and the names of these Caliphs have also not been reported. In addition to this, the above narration states that Islām will remain in a state of glory until there have been twelve Caliphs. However, the claim of the Shiā is that Islām went through a troublesome period during the rule of Ali ibn Abū Ṭālib and his sons, placing this report in direct opposition with the Twelver understanding of events.

In another transmission within Ṣāḥih Muslīm, Sa’d ibn Abu Waqqās narrates that he wrote a letter to Jābir ibn Sāmūrā to be informed of a statement of the Messenger of Allah, to which Jābir ibn Sāmūrā responded: “*The Islāmic religion will continue until the Hour has been established, or you have been ruled over by twelve Caliphs, all of them being from the Quraysh.*”⁵ It can be seen through this report that Jābir ibn Sāmūra also reported that the twelve Caliphs will rule over the Muslīm community. This point demonstrates that “*ḥadīth al-ithnā ‘ashar khalīfā*” cannot possibly be in reference to the twelve Imāms whom they consider infallible. The reason for this is because only two of the twelve Imāms ever ruled,

³ Narrated in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī under Kitāb al-Ahkām

⁴ Narrated in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslīm under Kitāb al-Imara

⁵ Narrated in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslīm under Kitāb al-Imara

whilst the other nine, were never able to claim *sultā* (political authority) – that is to say, they were never in a position that enabled them to appoint anyone as an *amir* (governor), issue *hudud* (capital) punishments or have any influence over political affairs. To the contrary, it is claimed by the Ithnā‘ashāriyyah that these nine imāms lived in taqīyya and were unable to hold any authority within the political sphere.

Another objection to this hādīth is that it is merely solitary (ahād) which means that it cannot be used to establish a point of aqīda or creed. The reason for this is because one’s creed must be based on yaqīn or certainty. The very meaning of the word “aqīda” is “*what the heart is knotted upon*” which means that it linguistically excludes speculation.⁶ In other words, an article of faith can only be based on a definitive text that is not subject to difference of opinion in either its meaning or its reliability. It is not unreasonable to assert that one of the narrators within a solitary chain of transmission (īsnād) may have made an error while transmitting the report either by way of a mistake, forgetfulness, or even lying. This is not just the conclusion of Zaydī scholars, but also the view of Ashārī and Maturidī scholars who make up mainstream Sunni thought.⁷

It may be argued that numerous narrators such as Abdul-Mālik ībn Umair, Hussain ībn Abdul-Rahman, Sīmak, Amer ībn Sa’ad ībn Abī Waqqās, as well as al-Sha’abī, and others, have transmitted this report within Ṣāḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣāḥīḥ Muslīm. However, this argument would be dismissed on the basis that all of these people are reporting this tradition as sub-narrators on the authority of Jābir ībn Sāmūra as tābī’een, not companions who heard this statement directly from the Prophet. In other words, even if a million sub-narrators were to report from one narrator, this doesn’t reach the status of mass-transmission or tawātur. A narration is only mutāwatīr if it is narrated by multiple sub-narrators to multiple narrators.

It could also be advanced by proponents of this hādīth that Jābir ībn Sāmūra is not the only companion to have narrated this hādīth. For instance, a report appears in Kitāb as-Sunnah by Ibn Abī ‘Asim that is narrated on the authority of the companion Abdullāh ībn` Amr, which

⁶ See Lisān al-‘Arab by Ibn Mandhur

⁷ Imām al-Sarakshī, a Hanafī and Maturidī scholar of 5AH articulates this as the Maturidī view within the authoritative work usul al-Sarakshī. Imām Nawawī of the Shafī’ī school also echoes this as the Ashārī view within his explanation (sharh) of Ṣāḥīḥ Muslīm, as does Imām al-Bayhaqī within his work al-Asma’ wa al-Sifāt.

states the following: Abdullāh ībn ‘Amr reports that the Messenger of Allah, said: “*There will be twelve Khulafā after me, starting with Abu Bakr al-Sīddīq whose rule won't last long*”.

However, this report cannot be used as evidence by the proponents of this argument for two reasons. First, the narration explicitly delegates and places Abu Bakr as the first Khalifa when the claim of the Ithnā‘ashārīyyā is that the first of the twelve Imāms is Ali ībn Abū Ṭālib. Secondly, according to Al-Albānī, this report is transmitted with an unreliable chain of transmission due to the inclusion of Rabi‘ah ībn Sayf who is the narrator that claims to have heard this report from Abdullah ībn ‘Amr.⁸ In other words, not only can this report not be soundly attributed to the Prophet, but is also cannot be firmly established to be the words of the companion Abdullāh ībn ‘Amr.

A similar report also appears within Musnād Ahmād on the authority of Ibn Mas‘ūd. The report is as follows: *Ibn Mas‘ūd was approached by a person and asked, “Did the Prophet ever mention how many Khulafā there will be within this ummah?” Ibn Mas‘ūd said, “Yes, and no one has asked me about this except you.” He then said, “Twelve - just like Bani Israel”.* However, this report cannot be used to support the doctrinal claims of the Twelvers because its chain of transmission has been graded as daef or weak by Shaykh Shu'aib al-Aranut due the inclusion of Mujalid ībn Sa‘īd as one of the sub-narrators.⁹

In relation to the reports which appear within Twelver sources, these would be dismissed on the basis that a tradition can only be used to establish a point of creed if it has been reported on the direct authority of the Prophet and consequently transmitted through tawātur. Moreover, if one was to cite a narration with a chain of transmission linked to Imām Jāfar al-Sādīq (or any of the twelve Imāms) which states that the Imāms are infallible, and then point out that Jāfar al-Sādīq was an Imām, followed up by asserting that Jāfar al-Sādīq must have therefore been infallible – would be engaging in a prime example of circular reasoning.

⁸ This report is located in Kitāb as-Sunnah by Ibn Abī 'Asim and graded as “daef” (weak) by Al-Albānī within his tahqīq of the work.

⁹ This hādīth is located within Musnād Ahmād and was graded as daef by Shaykh Shu'aib al-Aranut within his tahqīq of the collection due to the inclusion of Abi Aqeel and Mujalid ībn Sa‘īd. A similar tradition on the authority of Ibn Mas‘ūd is also present within Musnād Ahmād but this was also graded as weak by al-Aranut due to Mujalid ībn Sa‘īd’s presence within the chain of transmission.

A Zaydī explanation

Classical Zaydī scholars such as Imām Mansūr Billāh Abdullah ībn Hāmza (*sixth century AH*) have produced texts dedicated to the refutation of the Twelver school of thought,¹⁰ as well as contemporary Zaydī scholars such as Shaykh Abdullah ad-Daylamī who has authored a short treatise on this very subject entitled “*Ma’a Imāmī*” - which echoes the ideas expressed in this essay with a similar line of argumentation. That is to say, a solitary tradition cannot be used to establish a point of creed and the content of these hādīths are clearly in opposition with Twelver doctrine. However, ad-Daylamī offers an additional insight into this report and provides us with a reason as to why this tradition may have emerged in the first place. It is asserted by ad-Daylamī that a number of reasons allude to the view that this report is an Abbasid forgery. This is based on a variant of this tradition which appears in *Tārikh al-Khulafā* by as-Suyutī on the authority of Ibn Umar. The report is as follows: Ibn Umar reported that the Prophet said: “*There will be twelve Caliphs after me: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthmān, Mu’āwīya, Yazīd, as-Saffāh, Mansur, Jābir, al-Amīn, Salām, Mahdī and Amir al-‘Asb...*”¹¹ In addition to this report placing Abu Bakr as the first caliph, ad-Daylamī points out that Ali ībn Abū Ṭālib, as well as Imām al-Hasān are curiously missing from this list of khulafā, but strangely included are Mu’āwīya and Yāzīd. However, more to the point, half of the report contains Abbasid rulers within the text, making the “twelve Caliphs” hādīth a possible Abbasid forgery.

Conclusion

In summary, this hādīth cannot be used to establish the infallibility of the twelve imāms claimed by the Ithnā‘ashārīyyā. The narrations in question can only be soundly attributed to one companion - Jābir ībn Sāmūra, with all other reports narrated on the authority of other companions such as Abdullah ībn ‘Amr, Ibn Mas’ūd, and Ibn Umar containing unreliable

¹⁰ Imām Mansūr Billāh Abdullah ībn Hāmza’s text is entitled “*Iqdu ath-Thāmeen fī tabyeen Ahkām A’immat al-Hādīyeen.*”

¹¹This report can be located within *Tārikh al-Khulafā* by as-Suyutī. According to adh-Dhahabi who relies on Ibn Asākir, this report has been transmitted on the authority of Ibn Umar with multiple chains of transmission.

transmitters and clear-cut forgeries within the content of these reports. In addition to this, the actual content of these hādīths contain descriptions of khulafā, which unequivocally do not match the description of the “twelve infallible Imāms”. For instance, Jābir ībn Sāmūra reports that these twelve khulafā will rule over the Muslīm ummah, however only two of the twelve Imāms within the Ithnā‘ashārīyyā sect were ever able to rule. Moreover, there is no mention of their infallibility within these reports, nor the names of the khulafā question. Zaydī scholars have also highlighted out how this tradition appears nowhere within the Zaydī tradition and coupled this point with argumentation as to why this report may have been an Abbasid forgery. With all of this information taken into consideration, it simply cannot be argued that this hādīth should be used to establish a point of creed.

And Allah knows best!

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