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THE SUCCESSION OF THE PROPHET AND THE EVENT OF GHADEER

19th January 2019

During his return from the farewell pilgrimage, the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) gathered all the Hajj pilgrims at a place called Ghadeer Khum. Here he gave a lengthy sermon and made the declaration “For whomsoever I am his *mawla* Ali is his *mawla*”¹. The occurrence of this event and particular statement of the Prophet is widely accepted by Muslim scholars however there is difference in interpretation of what the Prophet meant, and whether it was in reference to his succession or not. The Centre for Intra Muslim Studies (CIMS) convened on 19th January 2019 to discuss this very topic amongst Muslim Scholars. The Sunni presentation was carried out by [Shaykh Ayman Yacoubi](#), a graduate of Al-Azhar University and currently a lecturer at the University of Birmingham, whilst the Shia presentation was by Shaykh Ayub Rashid, a graduate of the Hawzah in Qom, and a lecturer at The Islamic College, London.

Shaykh Ayman acknowledged the Sunni position that the event of Ghadeer did indeed occur and the above statement of the Prophet is considered to the level of *tawātur*². However, for him and indeed the general Sunni this was not about succession due to the context of this statement being in reference to an army dispute, and the non-objection of the vast number of companions to Ali not being chosen as the next caliph.

Offering a linguistic analysis of the narration in particular to the term ‘*mawla*’, Shaykh Ayman outlined how Sunni scholars interpret it as being ‘friend’ (*wali*)³. The Shaykh however, drawing from his experience in Arabic linguistics, did not agree with this view since *mawla* and *wāli* (leader) share the same root letters which would allow the possibility of the meaning being interchanged. Regarding the content of the narration, he pointed out that despite the narration having different

¹ See al-Tirmidhi, Muhammad, *Al-Jami’i al Kabir*, Vol. 1, Book 46, Hadith 3713; al-Kulayni, Muhammad Bin Yaquub. 1985. *Al-Kafi*. 5th ed. Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiya (1:295).

² *Tawātur* is a hadith term referring to a narration with a large number of narrators at each level that it would be highly unlikely that it could be forged.

³ Ibn Taymiyah, Ahmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm, and Ahmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyah. 1903. *Kitāb Minhāj al-sunnah al-nabawiyah fi naqḍ kalām al-Shi’ah wa-al-Qadarīyah*. Miṣr: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Amīriyah (7:324) <http://books.google.com/books?id=ZYgyAQAAAJ>.



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variations⁴, the least that is accepted by mainstream Sunnis is the designation of Ali as *mawla*. This statement according to him was in reference to a dispute within the army in which Ali was the commander. Ali objected to the soldiers distributing garments amongst themselves after one of the battles and ordered them to return the garments which led to some in the army being hostile to Ali. Because of this, the Prophet gathered all the people after the Hajj and proclaimed this statement to dispel any animosity against Ali⁵. For Shaykh Ayman, the convincing argument was the lack of objection by the companions in choosing someone other than Ali, i.e. on the subsequent appointment of Abu Bakr as the caliph after the death of the Prophet. Considering the sheer number of people present when the Prophet made the statement, he points out, there would surely have been objections to anyone else being chosen as caliph had the statement of the Prophet been in specific reference to succession of Ali.

Shaykh Ayub outlined that the Shia position on the issue holds that the incident of Ghadir was explicit in the Prophet's declaration of Ali as his successor. The linguistic usage of the term *mawla* in this context is suggestive of succession and is aided by multiple incidents alluding to Ali being the Prophet's successor. This demonstrate for the Shia that the Prophet gathered all the people at Ghadeer, not to resolve any army dispute but, to proclaim his successor as Ali.

At the crux of this discussion is not whether this incident happened or not, rather it is what the Prophet meant by the term *mawla*. Shaykh Ayub mentioned that Shia scholars such as al-Allama al-Amini in his book al-Ghadir mention the different usages of the term *mawla* citing up to twenty-seven meanings, however these scholars point out that the utilisation of *mawla* in this instance is indicative of succession⁶. To back this claim, they firstly address the linguistic utilisation of the term in the very narration of Ghadeer, in which the Prophet starts off with asking "Do I not have more authority (*awla*) over you than your own selves?"⁷. The terms *awla* and *mawla* share the same verbal root and are alluding to authority according to these scholars. Furthermore, as pointed out by Shaykh Ayub, the context of mentioning this statement was one where all the pilgrims were

⁴ Some of the variants of this narration include a prayer the Prophet added at the end of the narration, or the mentioning of the verse 5:3 being revealed at the end of this sermon.

⁵ Hākīm al-Nisābūrī, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh, and Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Dhahabī. 1990. *Al-Mustadrak 'alā Al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya (3:119) <http://lib.efatwa.ir/42119/3/119/4579>

⁶ Amīnī, 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad. 1977. *al-Ghadir: fī al-kitāb wa-al-Sunnah wa-al-adab* Bayrūt: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī (1:380) [link](#).

⁷ Kulayni, *al-Kafi* (1:295)



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gathered before their point of departure, wanting to declare something important and not clear up an army dispute which could be done in private. Furthermore, Shaykh Ayub outlined the Quranic verses related to the incident such as “O Apostle! Communicate that which has been sent down to you from your Lord, and if you do not, you will not have communicated His message”⁸ & “Today I have completed your religion”⁹. Shia exegetes hold that the message the Prophet was asked to convey was the announcing of Ali as his successor and that the religion was completed only after Ali was declared so¹⁰.

Amongst the issues raised by Sunni scholars was that if appointing Ali as successor was of utmost importance, it should then have been mentioned in the Quran explicitly. In response, some of the scholars pointed out that it is not always the case that the Quran is explicit in mentioning something, but suffices with a mere allusion to it. Further deliberation was also held around issues of *Khilāfa* and *Imāma*, and the possibility of it existing in two different people at the same time. Whilst the Imam is the ideal candidate for Khalifa according to the Shia, there is the possibility of these two positions existing in two separate individuals as evidenced in it existing in the Shia Imams in the presence of other political leaders. This bifurcation attributes spiritual leadership to the Imam whilst the political leadership to the Khalifa – a view shared by some Barelvi Sunnis. Whilst it was accepted that the narration of the Ghadeer sermon is *mutawātir*, there still exists a diversity over how to interpret the narration and whether it alludes to succession or not.

⁸ Quran 5:67

⁹ Quran 5:3

¹⁰ See Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Muḥammad Ḥusayn. 1971. *Al-mizān fī tafsīr al-Qurān*. Tehrān: Ismā'īlian (5:193) [link](#).