

Islam Question & Answer

General Supervisor:
Shaykh Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid

146316 - The hadeeth “There will appear among you twelve imams coming one after another, all of them from Quraysh.”

the question

I would like an explanation of this hadeeth, because the Shi’ah always quote it as evidence to support their arguments. In Saheeh Muslim it is narrated that Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Islam will continue until the beginning of the Hour, and there will appear among you twelve imams coming one after another, all of them from Quraysh.”

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly: the text of the hadeeth:

It was narrated that Jaabir ibn Samurah said: I entered upon the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) with my father, and I heard him say: “This matter will not end until there have been among them twelve caliphs.” Then he said something that I could not hear, and I said to my father: What did he say? He said: “All of them will be from Quraysh.”

Narrated by al-Bukhaari (no. 7222); Muslim (no. 1821).

According to other versions also narrated by Muslim:

“Islam will continue to prevail through twelve caliphs.”

“This religion will continue to prevail and be strong until there have been twelve caliphs.”

According to the version narrated by al-Bukhaari, it says: “There will be twelve rulers.” Then he said something I did not hear, and my father said that he said: “All of them will be from Quraysh.”

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Secondly:

The scholars have several approaches and interpretations as to the meaning of this hadeeth:

1. The first approach:

They said that what is meant is the fair and just caliphs; some of them have already appeared and passed on, and the number will be completed before the Hour begins.

An-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said, quoting from al-Qaadi 'Iyaad:

It may be that what is meant is those who are rightfully deserving of the caliphate; some of them have already come and passed on, and are known, and this number will inevitably be completed before the Hour begins. End quote.

Sharh Muslim, 12/202

This view was also favoured by Imam al-Qurtubi (may Allah have mercy on him), who said:

They are the just caliphs, such as the four (Rightly Guided) caliphs, and 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azeez. Others who are like them will inevitably appear and support truth and justice, until this number is completed. This is the most correct of the scholarly views in my opinion. End quote.

Al-Mufhim, 4/8

Al-Haafiz Ibn Katheer (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

What this hadeeth means is giving glad tidings of the coming of twelve righteous caliphs who will support the truth and treat the people with justice. It does not necessarily mean that they will come one after another; rather four of them have already come one after another, namely the four caliphs: Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmaan and 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with them). Another of them is

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'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azeez, according to the leading scholars, and others are some of the Abbasids.

The Hour will not begin until they have all come and the number is completed. What appears to be the case is that one of them will be the Mahdi who is foretold in the hadeeths that speak of him.

End quote.

Tafseer al-Qur'an al-'Azeem, 3/65

2. The second approach:

Another view is that what is meant is that the twelve will all appear at the same time and be contemporaries of one another.

An-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said, quoting from al-Qaadi 'Iyaad:

It was said that what is meant is that they will all appear at the same time, and each of them will be followed by a group (among the Muslims). Al-Qaadi said: It is not far-fetched to say that this has already happened, if you examine history. In Andalusia alone at the same time, after 433 AH, there were some of them, each of them claiming to be a caliph and taking that title. At that time there was another one in Egypt, and the Abbasid caliph was in Baghdad. This is in addition to others who also claimed to be caliphs at that time in other regions.

He said: This interpretation is supported by what is said in the book of Muslim after that: "... there will be many caliphs." They said: What do you command us to do? He said: "Fulfil the oath of allegiance to the first one, then the next." End quote.

Sharh Muslim, 12/202

Al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar said:

He - i.e., al-Muhallab - said: What appears most likely to be the case is that he (the Prophet -

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blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) foretold strange things and turmoil that would happen after he was gone, to the extent that the people would be divided among twelve rulers at the same time. If he had meant something other than that, he would have said, there will be twelve leaders who will do such and such. Because he did not tell us about them, we know that he meant that they would come at the same time. End quote from al-Muhallab.

Al-Haafiz said: This is the view of those who did not come across any of the other versions of the hadeeth except the report that appears in al-Bukhaari, which is a summarized version. It is known from the reports that I have quoted above, from Muslim and elsewhere, that he mentioned some of the characteristics of their rule, which is that Islam will be prevalent and strong during their rule. According to another report, there is another characteristic, which is that each of them will have the ummah united under his rulership, as it says in the version narrated by Abu Dawood. He narrated this hadeeth via Ismaa'eel ibn Abi Khaalid, from his father, from Jaabir ibn Samurah, as follows: "This religion will continue to prevail until there have been twelve caliphs, behind each of whom the ummah will be united. It was also narrated by at-Tabaraani via another isnaad from al-Aswad ibn Sa'eed, from Jaabir ibn Samurah, as follows: "They will not be harmed by the enmity of those who oppose them." End quote.

Fath al-Baari, 13/211

3. The third approach

The third view is that what is meant is caliphs during whose reign Islam will prevail and the ummah will unite around them, whether they are just and rule equitably or not.

An-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said, quoting from al-Qaadi 'Iyaad:

It may be that what is meant is the one at whose time Islam will prevail and the Muslims will unite around him, as it says in Sunan Abi Dawood: "behind each of whom the ummah will be united."

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This happened before the decline of Banu Umayyah (the Umayyads), when their rule became unstable and divisions appeared at the time of Yazeed ibn al-Waleed, when Banu al-'Abbaas (the Abbassds) rebelled against him. End quote.

Sharh Muslim, 12/202-203

Abu'l-'Abbaas al-Qurtubi (may Allah have mercy on him) said, when listing scholarly opinions concerning the hadeeth:

This is speaking of the caliphs who would come after him and after his companions. It is as if he was referring thereby to the rule of the Umayyads, and that what was meant by "religion" (deen) was power and rulership; this was said in reference to what would be the status quo at that time (i.e., they would be stable and have a strong hold on power), and it was not said by way of praise.

The word deen (usually translated as "religion") may be used to refer to power or kingship, as it was sometimes used in poetry.

The word is also used in this way in the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): "He could not take his brother by the law [deen] of the king (as a slave)" [Yoosuf 12:76].

Then he listed their kings or rulers:

The first of them was Yazeed ibn Mu'aawiyah, then his son Mu'aawiyah ibn Yazeed – and he did not mention Ibn az-Zubayr because he was a Sahaabi, or Marwaan because he usurped the position of Ibn az-Zubayr – then 'Abd al-Malik, then al-Waleed, then Sulaymaan, then 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azeez, then Yazeed ibn 'Abd al-Malik, then Hishaam ibn 'Abd al-Malik, then al-Waleed ibn Yazeed, then Yazeed ibn al-Waleed, then Ibraaheem ibn al-Waleed, then Marwaan ibn Muhammad. These were twelve in number. Then their caliphate ended and the caliphate passed into the hands of Banu'l-'Abbaas (the Abbasids).

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Al-Mufhim, 4/8-9

This opinion was mentioned by Ibn al-Jawzi in *Kashf al-Mushkil min Hadeeth as-Saheehayn*; he also quoted it from al-Khattaabi in a lengthy discussion of which this is a summary. Perhaps al-Qurtubi was narrating it from Ibn al-Jawzi.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

This is how they were; the caliphs were Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmaan and 'Ali.

Then there came to power whoever the people rallied behind and were able to hold the reins of power: Mu'aawiyah and his son Yazeed, then 'Abd al-Malik and his four sons; and 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azeez.

After that, the Islamic state was beset by the decline that has continued until the present. The Umayyads ruled all the Muslim lands, and during their era the Islamic state was powerful and the caliphs were called by their own names, 'Abd al-Malik and Sulaymaan; no such titles as 'Adad ad-Dawlah, 'Izz ad-Deen, Baha' ad-Deen (elaborate honorific titles given to the caliphs) were known.

One of them would be the one who led the people in offering the five daily prayers, handed out banners in the mosque (to the armies setting out on expeditions), and appoint commanders, but he would live in his own house; they did not live in palaces or remain aloof from the common people. End quote.

Minhaaj as-Sunnah, 8/170

Al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The view that is most likely to be correct is the third, because it is supported by the Prophet's words in other versions of the saheeh hadeeth, "the ummah will be united behind all of them." What happened was that the people united around Abu Bakr, then 'Umar, then 'Uthmaan, then

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'Ali, until the incident of the two arbitrators at Siffeen. At that time, Mu'aawiyah was called a caliph. Then the people united around Mu'aawiyah after he made a peace deal with al-Hasan. Then they united around his son Yazeed, and al-Husayn was not able to hold power; rather he was killed before that. Then when Yazeed died, there was some division, until they united around 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwaan after the killing of Ibn az-Zubayr. Then they united around his four sons, al-Waleed, then Sulaymaan, then Yazeed, then Hishaam; and 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azeez came between Sulaymaan and Yazeed. These were seven caliphs after the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, and the twelfth was al-Waleed ibn Yazeed ibn 'Abd al-Malik. The people united around him when his paternal uncle Hishaam died, and he reigned for approximately four years. Then they rebelled against him and killed him, and turmoil spread far and wide, and things changed from that day on. The people did not unite behind any caliph after that, because Yazeed ibn al-Waleed, who rebelled against his cousin al-Waleed ibn Yazeed, did not rule for long; rather the son of his father's cousin, Marwaan ibn Muhammad ibn Marwaan rebelled against him. When Yazeed died, he was succeeded by his brother Ibraaheem, but Marwaan defeated him. Then Banu'l-'Abbaas (the Abbasids) rebelled against Marwaan, until he was killed. Then the first of the Abbasid caliphs was Abu'l-'Abbaas al-Saffaah, whose reign did not last long because of the large numbers who rebelled against him. He was succeeded by his brother al-Mansoor whose reign lasted for a long time, but they lost the far Maghreb (Andalusia), when the Marwaanis took over Andalusia; they remained in control of it and later on began to call themselves caliphs. Then things started to decline in all regions of the Muslim world, to the point that there was nothing left of the caliphate except the name only, in some countries. Prior to that, during the era of Banu 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwaan, the khateeb had delivered their khutbahs in the name of the caliph in all regions, East and West, North and South, in all lands under Muslim control, and no one could hold any position of authority in any land except by appointment of the caliph. Whoever studies history will realise that this is true. Based on that, what is meant by the words "Then there will be harj (killing)" is the killing that results from widespread turmoil, and continues to spread and increase as time goes by, which is what happened. And Allah is the One Whose help we seek. End quote.

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Fath al-Baari, 13/214

4. The fourth approach

The fourth view is that these twelve caliphs will come after the appearance of the Mahdi at the end of time.

Ibn al-Jawzi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

With regard to the other way of interpreting the hadeeth that was mentioned by Abu'l-Husayn ibn al-Munaadi concerning this hadeeth, regarding the words "after me there will be twelve caliphs" he said: This will only take place after the death of the Mahdi who will emerge at the end of time. He said: We found in the Book of Daniel: When the Mahdi dies, there will be five rulers, who are descended from the older grandson - meaning the son of al-Hasan ibn 'Ali - then after them there will be another five from among the descendants of the younger grandson, then the last of them will give instructions that the (next) caliph should be a man from among the descendants of the older grandson, and he will take power, then after him his son will become ruler, and that will complete twelve rulers, each of whom will be a guided leader.

Ibn al-Munaadi said: We found in the report of Abu Saalih from Ibn 'Abbaas that he mentioned the Mahdi and said: Then after him will come twelve men, for one hundred and fifty years, six from among the descendants of al-Hasan, one from among the descendants of 'Aqeel ibn Abi Taalib, and five from among the descendants of al-Husayn. Then he will die and mischief will become widespread and evil will return.

Ka'b al-Ahbaar said: There will be twelve guided rulers, then the soul created by Allah (i.e., 'Eesa) will descend and will kill the Dajjaal. End quote.

Kashf al-Mushkil min Hadeeth as-Saheehayn, 1/292-293.

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Al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar quoted these words of al-Munaadi and said:

With regard to what he narrated from Abu Saalih, it is very weak, and the same applies to what he narrated from Ka'b.

End quote from Fath al-Baari, 13/214

5. The fifth approach

The fifth view is that it is to be understood as describing the ruling elite, the caliph, the viziers (advisers), governors, and so on.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Ibn Hubayrah interpreted the hadeeth as referring to the laws of the kingdom, based on twelve, such as viziers, judges and so on.

But this is not valid; rather the hadeeth is to be taken as it appears to be and there is no need for such a far-fetched interpretation. End quote.

Minhaaj as-Sunnah, 8/173

6. The sixth approach

The sixth view is to refrain from interpreting the hadeeth and leave knowledge thereof to Allah, may He be glorified and exalted.

An-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said, quoting from al-Qaadi 'Iyaad:

Allah knows best what he (the Prophet – blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) meant. End quote.

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Sharh Muslim, 12/203

Ibn Battaal narrated that al-Muhallab said:

I never met anyone who was certain about the interpretation of this hadeeth. End quote.

Fath al-Baari, 13/211

Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Among them were those who said that they did not understand what it meant, such as Abu Bakr ibn al-'Arabi. End quote.

Minhaaj as-Sunnah, 8/173

Thirdly:

With regard to the Shi'ah quoting this hadeeth as evidence for the belief in the imamate - which means belief that their imams are infallible rulers, and even that they have the power of issuing laws and are in control of the universe - of twelve men from the family of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), for whom they have a list of specific names, the last of whom is the Mahdi, this is a far-fetched and distorted understanding of the hadeeth, based on fanatical bias, ignorance, and whims and desires.

We will explain why this view is weak from several angles:

1.

What is mentioned in the hadeeth is "twelve caliphs", not "twelve imams." There is a difference between the two. In their view imamate is more than mere caliphate and rule; according to their beliefs, imamate requires obedience, and implies that the imams are infallible in word and deed,

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that they act on behalf of Allah, may He be exalted, in controlling the universe, that they have absolute knowledge of the unseen, and other exaggerated notions that reached the point of kufr (disbelief that puts them beyond the pale of Islam), Allah forbid. All the hadeeth is actually saying is that there will be twelve caliphs or, according to another report, twelve ameers (rulers). This indicates that twelve men of Quraysh will be in positions of rulership.

2.

These twelve men were all described in the hadeeth as belonging to Quraysh. The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "... all of them (will be) from Quraysh." If they were from the family of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), he would have said "... all of them from Banu Haashim," because identifying someone as a Haashimi is more specific than identifying him as a Qurashi; the custom is to attribute a person to the closest or most specific lineage. If all of them were to be from Banu Haashim, he would not have said that they would be from Quraysh. [Banu Haashim are a clan of Quraysh]

3.

The text of the hadeeth indicates that the era of these twelve would be an era of strength, power and righteousness, in which Islam would be prevailing. This did not happen during the era of the twelve imams in whom the Shi 'ah believe. All of them lived a life of weakness and persecution, hidden from view, so how could they have been able to contribute to the glory and strength of Islam in that situation?

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

"Whoever thinks that these twelve are the ones who the Raafidis believe are their imams is utterly ignorant, for none of them carried a sword except 'Ali ibn Abi Taalib. All the rest of the imams, apart from 'Ali, never carried a sword, especially the Awaited One (al-Muntazar - the last imam).

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Rather he, according to those who believe in his imamate, is either scared and helpless or on the run, hiding for more than four hundred years.

This hidden one never guided anyone who had gone astray, he never enjoined any good, forbade any evil or supported any oppressed person; he never gave a fatwa concerning any issue, he never gave a ruling and it is not known that he even existed at all!

What benefit did he offer, even if he did exist, let alone Islam prevailing because of him?

Moreover, the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) stated that Islam would remain strong and this ummah would remain in good shape until there had been twelve caliphs. If what is meant thereby is these twelve imams, the last of whom is al-Muntazar, who supposedly exists now, until he appears to them, as they believe, then Islam should still have been strong during the Umayyad and 'Abbasid periods, and it should have prevailed when the disbelievers emerged in the East and the West (i.e., the Mongols and the Crusaders) and did what they did to the Muslims, which would take too long to describe here. Islam should have been still prevailing until today, and this is something other than what the hadeeth indicates.

Moreover, Islam - according to the Imami Shi'ah - is what they are following, and they are the most humiliated sect of the ummah. There are no followers of whims and desires who are more lowly than the Raafidis; no group is more concealing of their beliefs than them or more assiduous in practicing taqiyyah (dissimulation). They claim to be followers of the twelve imams, yet they are the most humiliated. What support of Islam was achieved by these twelve, as they claim? Many of the Jews, when they became Muslim, became Shi'ah, because they read in the Torah mention of twelve, so they think that these are the ones. But that is not the case; rather these twelve (in the hadeeth) are the men of Quraysh who took positions of leadership and caliphate in the ummah; at their time Islam was strong, and this is well known. End quote.

Minhaaj as-Sunnah, 8/173-174

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Al-Haafiz Ibn Katheer (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

This hadeeth indicates the inevitability of there being twelve just caliphs, but they are not the twelve imams of the Shi'ah. Many of the latter had no power at all, whereas these (caliphs mentioned in the hadeeth) will be of Quraysh, and they will have power and will be just. End quote.

Tafseer al-Qur'an al-'Azeem, 6/78

Shaykh 'Uthmaan al-Khamees (may Allah preserve him) said:

One may wonder: is it mere coincidence that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said that twelve would rule or be in charge of the Muslims, and the number of the imams of the Shi'ah is twelve?

Answer:

This is not a coincidence. The early Shi'ah never had this idea of twelve imams. Hence the Shi'ah divided into many sects. Some Shi'ah believe that only 'Ali was an imam; they are the Saba'is, who stopped at that point. Another group said that he was an imam, as were al-Hasan, al-Husayn and Muhammad ibn 'Ali; they are the Keesaanis, and they stopped at Muhammad. Another group said that the imamate went up to Ja'far then stopped. And another group said that al-Muntazar (the awaited one) is also an imam; they are the Ithna 'Asharis (Twelvers). And there are other groups and many other divisions. Anyone who wishes to know more may refer to an-Noobakhti's book on the Shi'ah sects.

So you can see that the idea of twelve imams came very late, because this idea did not exist among the early Shi'ah; the hadeeths they quote were fabricated after the death of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and even after the death of most of the imams of the Shi'ah.

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Thus it will become clear to you that the Shi'ah are the ones who made this number match the number in the hadeeth of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

Finally, I say that the sound report is the one that says "all of them from Quraysh". The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) would not have mentioned this general claim if he had meant something more specific; doing so is contrary to eloquence, and the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was the most eloquent of people.

For example, I would not say, "I am going to give a hundred dinars to every Arab," then if an Egyptian comes to me, I tell him that I meant every Syrian. Is he not going to accuse me of being foolish and unable to express myself, and tell me that in that case I should have said "every Syrian"?

If the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) had meant 'Ali and his sons, he would have said, "They are 'Ali and his sons." Even if he had said "All of them from Banu Haashim," that would have been eloquent. Banu Haashim were many, and Quraysh were more numerous, but the report speaks of them (Quraysh). If at-Tijaani [who wrote a book in support of Shi'i ideas] and others quote this hadeeth as evidence because it matches the number they have, then what would they say about the hadeeth narrated by Imam Muslim in his Saheeh (2779), according to which the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "Among my ummah there will be twelve hypocrites; they will not enter Paradise or even smell its fragrance, until the camel goes through the eye of the needle"? End quote.

Kashf al-Jaani Muhammad at-Tijaani (a refutation of at-Tijaani's book), p. 75 ff

And Allah knows best.