95747 - How Many Prophets Are There in Islam?

the question

Is there any sahih hadith that gives the number of prophets and messengers?

Summary of answer

There is no reliable hadith about the number of Prophets and Messengers in Islam; no one knows their number except Allah. For more, see the detailed answer.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Messengers were sent to every nation

Allah, may He be exalted, sent messengers to every nation and He stated that they came one after another, as He says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Then We sent Our messengers in succession, every time there came to a nation their messenger, they denied him, so We made them follow one another (to destruction), and We made them as ahadith (the true stories for mankind to learn a lesson from them). So away with a people who believe not” [al-Muminun 23:44]

“Verily! We have sent you with the truth, a bearer of glad tidings, and a warner. And there never was a nation but a warner had passed among them” [Fatir 35:24].

Number of prophets mentioned in the Quran

Allah has named some of those Messengers and told us the stories of some of them, but not of many others. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Verily, We have inspired you (O Muhammad) as We inspired Nuh (Noah) and the prophets after him; We (also) inspired Ibrahim (Abraham), Ismail (Ishmael), Ishaque (Isaac), Yaqub (Jacob), and Al-Asbat (the twelve sons of Yaqub (Jacob)), ‘Isa (Jesus), Ayyub (Job), Yunus (Jonah), Harun (Aaron), and Sulaiman (Solomon), and to Dawud (David) We gave the Zabur (Psalms).

And messengers We have mentioned to you before, and messengers We have not mentioned to you, - and to Musa (Moses) Allah spoke directly” [an-Nisa 4:163-164].

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

“These are the names of the prophets whose names are mentioned in the Quran: Adam, Idris, Nuh, Hud, Salih, Ibrahim, Lut, Isma’il, Ishaq, Ya‘qub, Yusuf, Ayyub, Shu‘ayb, Musa, Harun, Yunus, Dawud, Sulayman, Ilyas, al-Yasa‘, Zakariyya, Yahya, and ‘Isa (blessings and peace be upon them), as well as Dhu’l-Kifl according to many commentators, and their leader is Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

The words “and messengers We have not mentioned to you” mean: other people who are not mentioned in the Quran.” (Tafsir Ibn Kathir, 2/469)

Authenticity of Hadiths about the number of prophets and messengers

The scholars differed as to the number of prophets and messengers , according to what reached them and their opinions on the authenticity of the hadiths that mentioned their numbers. Those who classed the hadiths as sahih or hasan gave their opinion based on those reports; those who classed the hadiths as da‘if said that the number could not be known except through Revelation, so they refrained from stating a number.

The hadiths that mentioned a number are as follows:

1. Abu Dharr said: I said: O Messenger of Allah, how many prophets were there? He said: “One hundred and twenty four thousand.” I said: O Messenger of Allah, how many of them were Messengers? He said: “Three hundred and thirteen, a good number.” I said: O Messenger of Allah,

who was the first of them? He said: “Adam.” … Narrated by Ibn Hibban, 361

This hadith is da‘if jiddan (very weak). Its isnad includes Ibrahim ibn Hisham al-Ghassani, of whom adh-Dhahabi said: he is matrook (rejected). Indeed, Abu Hatim said: (He is) a liar. Hence Ibn al-Jawzi ruled that the hadith was fabricated and false.

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

“This hadith was narrated at length by al-Hafiz Abu Hatim ibn Hibban al-Basti in his book al-Anwa‘ wa’t-Taqaseem, and he said that it was sahih. But Abu’l-Faraj ibn al-Jazwi disagreed with him and included this hadith in his book al-Mawdu‘at (the fabricated hadiths) and accused Ibraheem ibn Hisham of fabricating the hadith. There is no doubt that more than one of the imams of al-jarh wa’t-ta‘dil (evaluation of hadith narrators) criticised him because of this hadith.” (Tafsir Ibn Kathir, 2/470)

Shu‘ayb al-Arnaut said: “Its isnad is da‘if jiddan (very weak) – and he quoted the comments of the scholars about Ibrahim ibn Hisham.” (Tahqiq Sahih Ibn Hibban, 2/79)

2. A hadith mentioning this number - one hundred and twenty four thousand – was also narrated via another isnad:

Abu Umamah said: I said: O Prophet of Allah, how many prophets were there? He said: “One hundred and twenty four thousand, of whom three hundred and fifteen were a good number.” Narrated by Ibn Hibban in his Tafseer, 963

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

“Mu‘an ibn Rifa‘ah as-Silami is da‘if; ‘Ali ibn Yazid is da‘if; and al-Qasim Abu ‘Abd ar-Rahman is also da‘if.” (Tafsir Ibn Kathir, 2/470)

3. The hadeeth of Abu Dharr (may Allah be pleased with him) was also narrated via another isnad, without any mention of the number of prophets; rather it mentions the number of messengers:

He said: I said: O Messenger of Allah, how many messengers were there? He said: “Three hundred

and umpteen, a good number.” (Narrated by Ahmad, 35/431)

According to another report (35/438): “three hundred and fifteen, a good number.”

Shu‘ayb al-Arna’ut said:

“Its isnad is da‘if jiddan (very weak), because ‘Ubayd ibn al-Khashkhash is majhul (unknown) and Abu ‘Umar ad-Dimashqi is da‘if. Ad-Daraqutni said: al-Mas‘udi from Abu ‘Umar ad-Dimashqi is matruk (rejected).” Al-Mas'udi is ‘Abd ar-Rahman ibn ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Utbah.” (Tahqiq Musnad Ahmad, 35/432)

4. Anas said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Allah sent eight thousand Prophets, four thousand to the Children of Israel and four thousand to the rest of mankind.” (Narrated by Abu Ya‘la in his Musnad, 7/160)

This hadith is da‘if jiddan (very weak).

Al-Haythami (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“It was narrated by Abu Ya‘la and its isnad includes Musa ibn ‘Ubaydah ar-Rabdhi, who is da‘if jiddan.” (Majma‘ az-Zawaid, 8/210)

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

“This is also a da‘if isnad. It includes ar-Rabdhi who is da‘if, and his shaykh ar-Raqqashi is also weaker than him.” (Tafsir Ibn Kathir, 2/470)

5. Abu’l-Waddak said: Abu Sa‘id said to me: Do the Kharijis believe in the Dajjal? I said: No. He said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) said: “I am the Seal of a thousand prophets or more; no prophet was sent but he warned his nation about the Dajjal…” (Narrated by Ahmad, 18/275)

This hadith is daeef because Mujalid ibn Sa‘id is da‘if.

Al-Haythami (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“It was narrated by Ahmad, and its isnad includes Mujalid ibn Sa‘id. An-Nasai classed him as thiqah (trustworthy) in one report but he said concerning another: He is not qawiy (strong). A number of scholars classed him as da‘if.” (Majma‘ az-Zawaid, 7/346)

It was also classed as da‘if by al-Arnaut in Tahqiq al-Musnad, 18/276

6. This hadith was narrated from Jabir ibn ‘Abdullah (may Allah be pleased with him):

It was narrated by al-Bazzar in his Musnad, 3380, Kashf al-Astar.

Its isnad includes Mujalid ibn Sa‘id; it has been stated above that he is da‘if.

Al-Haythami (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“It was narrated by al-Bazzar and its isnad includes Mujalid ibn Sa‘id, who was classed as da‘if by the majority.” (Majma‘ az-Zawaid, 7/347)

From the hadiths quoted above – and there are others that we have not quoted to save space, all of which are da‘if – it is clear that the reports differ concerning the number of prophets and messengers . Every group spoke on the basis of the reports that were sahih in their opinion. The most well-known of the reports mentioned above is the hadith of Abu Dharr (may Allah be pleased with him), which says that the number of prophets was one hundred and twenty four thousand, among whom the number of messengers was three hundred and fifteen. Some of the scholars even said that the number of prophets was the same as the number of Companions of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and the number of messengers was the same as the number of those who were present at Badr.

But by examining the isnads of these reports, it does not seem to us that these hadiths are sahih, either individually or when their isnads are put together.

Opinions of scholars on the hadiths about the number of prophets and messengers

There follow the opinions of some of the leading scholars who said that these hadiths and the numbers mentioned in them are not sahih (sound):

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

“From what is mentioned by Ahmad, Muhammad ibn Nasr and others, it is clear that they did not know the number of Books and messengers, and the hadith of Abu Dharr that speaks of that was not proven in their view.” (Majmu‘ al-Fatawa, 7/409)

From this report from the two imams Ahmad and Muhammad ibn Nasr al-Marwazi it is clear that they regarded the hadiths which speak of the number of prophets as da‘if. What appears to be the case is that Shaykh al-Islam (may Allah have mercy on him) supported them in that. And he indicated that the hadith of Abu Dharr was da‘if. As he said: It was narrated in the hadith of Abu Dharr that their number was three hundred and thirteen, but that hadith was not quoted as evidence; rather what is quoted as evidence is the verses that speak of their large number.

2. Ibn ‘Atiyyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said in his commentary on the verse in an-Nisa:

“The words of Allah, may He be exalted, “and messengers We have not mentioned to you” [an-Nisa 4:164], imply a large number of prophets, without mentioning a specific number. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And there never was a nation but a warner had passed among them” [Fatir 35:24]

“and many generations in between” [al-Furqan 25:38].

What has been narrated about the number of prophets is not correct; Allah knows best about their number, may the blessings of Allah be upon them.”

3. The scholars of the Standing Committee were asked:

What is the number of prophets and messengers (blessings and peace of Allah be upon them)?

They replied:

“No one knows their number except Allah, because He says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And, indeed We have sent messengers before you (O Muhammad); of some of them We have related to you their story and of some We have not related to you their story” [Ghafir 40:78].

Those who are known are those who are mentioned in the Quran or in the sahih Sunnah.

(Shaykh ‘Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz, Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Razzaq ‘Afifi, Shaykh ‘Abdullah ibn Ghadyan, Shaykh ‘Abdullah ibn Qa‘ud, Fatawa al-Lajnah ad-Daimah, 3/256)

4. Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Baz (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

In the hadith of Abu Dharr that is narrated by Abu Hatim ibn Hibban and others, it says that he asked the Prophet about the messengers and about the prophets, and the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “The prophets were one hundred and twenty-four thousand and the messengers were three hundred and thirteen.”

According to the report of Abu Umamah: three hundred and fifteen. But these are both da‘if hadith according to the scholars. They have corroborating reports, but those are also da‘if, as we have mentioned above.

According to some of them it says that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said that there were a thousand prophets or more , and in some it says that the number of prophets was three thousand. All the hadiths that speak of this matter are da‘if; in fact Ibn al-Jawzi regarded the hadith of Abu Dharr as being fabricated.

The point is that there is no reliable report about the number of prophets and messengers; no one knows their number except Allah, may He be glorified and exalted. But they were a good number. Allah has told us the stories of some of them and He has not told us the stories of others in His wisdom, may He be glorified and exalted.” (Majmu‘ Fatawa ash-Shaykh Ibn Baz, 2/66, 67)

5. Shaykh ‘Abdullah ibn Jibrin (may Allah preserve him) was asked:

What is the number of prophets and messengers? Is not believing in some of them (because we are unaware of them) regarded as kufr? What is the number of divinely revealed Books?

He replied:

“In a number of hadiths it is stated that the number of the prophets was one hundred and twenty-four thousand, and that the number of messengers among them was three hundred and thirteen; it was also narrated that the number of prophets was eight thousand. All of these hadiths were quoted in Ibn Kathir’s Tafsir al-Quran al-‘Azim, at the end of Surah an-Nisa, in his commentary on the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “and messengers We have not mentioned to you” [an-Nisa 4:164]. But the hadiths about this matter are all da‘if, despite the fact that there are so many.

So it is better to refrain from discussing this matter. What is required of the Muslim is to believe specifically in those prophets whose names were mentioned by Allah and His Messenger, and to believe in the rest in general terms.

Allah condemned the Jews for differentiating between them, as He said (interpretation of the meaning): “…saying, We believe in some but reject others…” [an-Nisa 4:150]. We believe in every prophet and every messenger whom Allah sent at some time or another, but each one’s message was for the people of his own time and his Book was for his nation and his people.

With regard to the number of Books, it says in the lengthy hadith narrated from Abu Dharr that the number of Books was one hundred books and four books, as was mentioned by Ibn Kathir in his commentary on the verse quoted above. But Allah knows best how sound this is. Allah has mentioned the Torah, the Gospel, the Psalms (Zabur), and the Scriptures of Ibrahim and Musa, so we believe in that and we believe that Allah has many Books of which we have no knowledge; it is sufficient for us to believe in them in general terms.” (Fatawa Islamiyyah, 1/41)

And Allah knows best.