

The Etymology of “*Khilāfah*”

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It is needless to overemphasise that the greatest and the foremost source of Islamic concepts and institutions is the Holy Qur'an; next to it is the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) which is sometimes interpreted as the *Sunnah*. A careful examination of the relevant verses of the Qur'an shows that the term of the *khilāfah* has not been used in the Qur'an, but other derivations having the same root *khalafa* (kh-l-f) e.g. *khalīfah*, *khulafa* and *khalaiif*. The Qur'an also uses some other words, of the same nature and connotation such as *malik*, *muluk*, *makkanna* and *waritha* and some of their derivations. All these and some other terms in one way or the other are related to the political concepts of Islam, signifying the basic principles of rule i.e. the establishment of the *dīn*. To perform this task, Allah sent a large number of Prophets. All the Prophets led their nations according to the command of Allah. It is these prophets, and nations who were bestowed with their trust of vicegerency (*khilāfah*), which is mentioned by Qur'an in different chapters.

The reference to *khalīfah* occurs in two passages of the Qur'an. In the first case, it

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is for Adam in *surah al-Baqarah* verse no.30 (2:30), and second for Dawud in *surah Sād*, verse no.26 (38:26).

The verse in which reference is made to Adam declares that Allah has made him vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on the earth.

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً ۗ
الْبقره ٣٠

'Behold, thy lord said to the angels; I will creat a vicegerent on earth.....(2:30)

'Vicegerent' stands for *khalīfah* and is derived from *Khalafa* which means 'he came after', or succeeded another that had perished or died.¹ Scholars are generally unanimous over this meaning of the *khalīfah*. Tabari says that "the word *khalīfah* is derived from the word '*khalafa*' meaning succession or taking place of someone, as Allah says 'Then we make you successors (*khalāif*) in the land after them, to see how ye would behave' (10:14) meaning that He 'replaced them with you on earth'..... on this account the supreme ruler (*al-sultān al-a'zam*) is termed as the *khalīfah* because he replaces the one who was before him, and takes his place in all affairs."²

Tabari's discussion is quite lengthy and deals with the history of the *khilāfah* on the earth. He opines that the *jinn* were the first *khulafāh* on earth who were later succeeded by Adam after his descent from the heavens.³ Tabari provides another opinion about the origin of the *khilāfah* quoting Hasan Basri that actually it originated with Adam and his children who succeeded each other.⁴

All other commentators of the Qur'an and legal experts such as Qurtubi, Ibn Kathir, Razi and several others among the medievelists and many modern writers like Shibli, Sulaiman Nadvi, Mawdudi, Syed Ahmad Akbarabadi and some others also support the above derivation and meaning of the *khalīfah*.⁵

The other passage which establishes the *khalīfah* of Dawud, says Tabari, Qurtubi Ibn Kathir among the classical commentators and Thanawi, Mawdudi, Daryabadi etc. among the modern writers that Dawud was made a ruler on earth.⁶

يَا دَاوُدُ إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاكَ خَلِيفَةً فِي الْأَرْضِ فَاحْكُم بَيْنَ النَّاسِ بِالْحَقِّ.....(ص ٢٦)

'O David! We did indeed make thee a vicegerent on earth:
so judge thou between men in truth (and justice).....'(38:26)

The term *khalīfah* used in two different verses of the Qur'an provides two related meanings: first that man or for that matter Adam is the successor of his predecessor i.e. *jinn* or *angels*⁷ and according to Tabari and several writers, of Allah on earth.⁸ Secondly the *khalīfah* is the ruler on earth.

Khalīfa's plurals *khulafa* and *khalāif* are used in some verses of the Qur'an in the same meaning. The word *khulafa* finds mention at three places in the Qur'an: in *surah al-A'arāf* at two places and in *surah al-Namal* at one place

وَأذْكُرُوا إِذْ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ خُلَفَاءَ مِنْ بَعْدِ قَوْمِ نُوحٍ (الاعراف ٦٩)

Call in remembrance that he made you inheritors after the people of Nuh.....'(7:69)

وَأذْكُرُوا إِذْ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ خُلَفَاءَ مِنْ بَعْدِ عَادٍ (اعراف ٤٣)

'And remember how He made you inheritors after the 'Ad people....'(7:74)

أَمَّنْ يُجِيبُ الْمُضْطَرَّ إِذَا دَعَاهُ وَيَكْشِفُ السُّوءَ وَيَجْعَلُكُمْ خُلَفَاءَ الْأَرْضِ أَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ (الزل ٦٢)

'Or, who listens to the distressed when he calls on Him, and who relieves His suffering,
and makes you (Mankind) inheritors of the earth.....'(27:62)

Abdullah Yusuf Ali translates the word '*khulafa*' as 'inheritors' while Picktha renders it as 'viceroys'. But all the three verses as referred to above deal with the succession of one generation after the other. The *Surah al-A'arāf* verse no.69 is concerned with the succession of 'Ad people after the people of Nuh, while the verse no. 74 deals with the succession of Thamud after 'Ad. Although several commentators like Qurtubi and Ibn *Kathīr* etc. maintain that the *surah al-Namal* verse no. 62 is concerned with the succession of generation,⁹ the text clearly indicates to their temporal power on earth i.e. they were made rulers in their periods.

The Synonym *khalāif* occurs at four places in the Qur'an: at one place each in the *surah al-Anām* and in the *surah al-Fātir* and at two places in the *surah Yūnus*.

وَهُوَ الَّذِي جَعَلَكُمْ خَلَائِفَ الْأَرْضِ (الانعام ٦٩)

'It is He who hath made you the inheritors of the earth.....' (6:69)

ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ خَلَائِفَ فِي الْأَرْضِ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ لِنَنْظُرَ كَيْفَ تَعْمَلُونَ (يونس ١٣)

'Then we made you heirs in the land after them to see how ye would behave' (10:14)

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَجَبْتَهُ وَمَنْ مَعَهُ فِي الْفُلْكِ وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ خَلَائِفَ وَأَغْرَقْنَا الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا (يونس ٤٣)

They rejected him, but we delivered him, and those with him, in the Ark, and we made them inherit (the earth) (10:73)

هُوَ الَّذِي جَعَلَكُمْ خَلَائِفَ فِي الْأَرْضِ (فاطر، ٣٩)

'He it is that has made you inheritors in the earth.....'

Both classical and modern writers of Islam and commentators of the Quran agree on the point that the word *khalāif* at all places in the Qur'an means succession of the

later people of their predecessors. This is evidently clear from the writings of Tabari, Qurtubi, Ibn Kathir, Mawdudi, Daryabadi, Amin Ahsan Islahi, Mufti Muhammad Shafi, Abdullah Yusuf Ali and a host of others.¹⁰ The latter's words which typically represent the views of others while commenting on the verse no. 14 of *surah Yūnus* are as follows:

“This is addressed to the Quraish in the first instance for they had succeeded to the A'd and Thamud heritage. But the application is universal, and was true to the Abbasi empire in the time of Harun al-Rashid or the Muslim empire in Spain or the Turkish empire in its palmiest days and indeed, to the Muslims and non-Muslims of our own days.”

[All] the derived words of the root *khalaf* such as *yastakhlif*, *yastakhlifakum*, *istakhlafa* and *yastakhlifannahuam* occur in four verses of the Qur'an

وَرَبُّكَ الْغَفُورُ ذُو الرَّحْمَةِ إِنْ يَشَاءُ يُدْهِبْكُمْ وَيَسْتَخْلِفْ مِنْ بَعْدِكُمْ مَا يَشَاءُ كَمَا
أَنْشَأَكُمْ مِنْ ذُرِّيَّةٍ قَوْمٍ آخَرِينَ (الانعام-١٣٣)

“Thy lord is self-sufficient, full of Mercy: if it were His will, He could destroy you, and in your place appoint whom He will as your successors, even as he raised you up from the posterity of other people” (6:133)

قَالَ عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَنْ يَهْلِكَ عَدُوُّكُمْ وَيَسْتَخْلِفَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ
فَيَنْظُرَ كَيْفَ تَعْمَلُونَ (الاعراف-١٢٩)

“.....He said: 'It may be that your lord will destroy your enemy and make you inheritors in the earth; that so He may see how ye act.'” (7:129)

إِن تَوَلَّوْا.....وَيَسْتَخْلِفُ رَبِّي قَوْمًا غَيْرَكُمْ (هود-٥٤)

“If you turn away,..... My lord will make another people to succeed you.....” (11:57)

وَعَدَّ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنكُمْ وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَيَسْتَخْلِفَنَّهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كَمَا اسْتَخْلَفَ

الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ وَلَيُمَكِّنَنَّ لَهُمْ دِينَهُمُ الَّذِي ارْتَضَى لَهُمْ

وَلَيُبَدِّلَنَّهُم مِّن بَعْدِ خَوْفِهِمْ أَمْنًا يَعْبُدُونَنِي لَا يُشْرِكُونَ بِي

شَيْئًا وَمَن كَفَرَ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ (النور-٥٥)

“Allah has promised, to those among you who believe and work righteous deeds, that He will, of a surety, grant them in the land, inheritance (of power), as He granted it to those before them; that He will establish in authority their religion—the one which He has chosen for them; and that He will change (their state), after the fear in which they (lived), to one of security and peace: 'they will worship Me (alone) and not associate aught with Me. 'If any do reject faith after this, they are rebellious and wicked.” (24:55)

These verses not only refer to the succession of one people by the later but also indicate to the basis of such succession: If a people pursue the right path and follow the command of Allah they would be endowed with the power and authority on earth, and if they indulge in misdeeds and mischief they would be deprived of it; and others would be given a chance to prove themselves as the worthy successors and rightful rulers. This fact is best illustrated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Daryabadi while commenting the verse no. 55 of *surah al-Nūr*. The former writes:

“If this verse was revealed about the time of the Battle of Ditch (Khandaq)... we can imagine the comfort it gave to the Muslims who were besieged in Madina by a

force ten times their number. The Muslims then lived in a great suspense and danger... the security and authority they were promised came to them in subsequent measures.”¹²

On the same lines Abdul Majid Daryabadi states that “This is by way of prophecy. The Muslims harrassed and persecuted are given the cheerful news that God shall destroy their enemies in the future as he destroyed them in the past, and that they shall soon be able to establish their rule as the standard bearers of God’s law and religion.”¹³

In addition to the basic term *khalīfah* and its several derivations, there are several other words in the Qur’an which have some political and temporal connotations such as *waritha*, *yarithu*, *malik*, *mulūk*... A critical analysis of these words would bring out the Qur’anic concepts and Islamic precepts of the political system which Allah wishes to establish on this earth. The word *waritha* and its derivatives according to Muhammad Fawad occurs at thirty five places in the Qur’an.¹⁴ Many of them have the meaning of succession coupled with power on this earth. For instance *surah al-Namal* verse no. 16 declares Sulaiman as successor of his father Dawud.

وَوَرِثَ سُلَيْمٰنٌ دَاوُدَ (النمل-١٦)

“And Solomon was David’s heir....” (27:16)

In the opinion of Abdullah Yusuf Ali “the point is that Solomon not only inherited his father’s kingdom, but his spiritual insight and prophetic office, which do not necessarily go from father to son.”¹⁵ It may be added here that in the case of Banu Israil many Prophets inherited the office of the prophethood also from their prophet-fathers, for instance, Ya’qub succeeded Ishaq while Yusuf succeeded Ya’qub.

Another political term referred to in the Quran very frequently is *mulk* and its derivations such as *malik* and *mulūk* which generally means kingship, or for that matter

ruling power. An analysis of these words shows that some of the Prophets were also made *mulūk* and given power to rule (*mulk*) by Allah. Chronologically speaking Ibrahim's family ('Al) were the first to receive this divinely power.

فَقَدْ آتَيْنَا آلَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَآتَيْنَاهُمْ مُلْكًا عَظِيمًا (النساء-٥٣)
 "..... Be we had already given the people of Abraham the book and wisdom, and conferred upon them a great kingdom" (4:54)

Prophet Yusuf was granted a kingdom

وَكَذَلِكَ مَكَّنَّا لِيُوسُفَ فِي الْأَرْضِ (يوسف-٥٦)

"Thus did we give established power of Joseph in the land." (12:56)

رَبِّ قَدْ آتَيْتَنِي مِنَ الْمُلْكِ وَعَلَّمْتَنِي مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ (يوسف-١٠١)
 "O my lord! thou hast indeed bestowed on me some power, and taught me something of the interpretation of dreams....." (12:101)

Talut was appointed as a king over Banu Israil by Prophet Shumail.¹⁶ Banu Israil objected to his appointment because he belonged to the family of Binyamin b. Yaqub who has no political power or prophethood.¹⁷

وَقَالَ لَهُمْ نَبِيُّهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ قَدْ بَعَثَ لَكُمْ طَالُوتَ مَلِكًا (البقره-٢٤٧)

"The prophet said to them; Allah has appointed Talut as king over you....."

—Dawud was given the kingdom of the earth after he killed Jalut (Goliath). (12:247)

فَهَزَمُوهُم بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ وَقَتَلَ دَاوُدُ جَالُوتَ وَآتَاهُ اللَّهُ الْمُلْكَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ (البقره-٢٥١)

"By Allah's will, they routed them; And David slew Goliath, and Allah gave him power and wisdom....." (2:251)

At another place he (Dawud) is called as the *khalīfah* divinely proclaimed, meaning thereby that his *mulūk* and *khilāfah* were synonymous, whereas his son Sulaiman inherited his father's kingdom, and became the ruler over Banu Israil with unprecedentedly widest powers given to anyone on this earth.

قَالَ رَبِّ اغْفِرْ لِي وَهَبْ لِي مُلْكًا لَا يَنْبَغِي لِأَحَدٍ مِّنْ بَعْدِي (ص-٣٥)

"He said, 'O my lord! forgive me, and grant me a kingdom which will not belong to another after me.....'" (38:35)

Several verses of the Qur'an establish that several peoples (*qawm*) such as the 'Al (progeny) of Ibrahim and the (*qawm*) of Musa particularly Banu Israil were honoured by Allah with Prophethood (*nubwah*) and (*mulk*), for many persons were made prophets (*anbiya*) and kings or rulers (*muluk*) in successive generations.

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ يُقْوِمُوا ذِكْرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ جَعَلَ فِيكُمْ أَنْبِيَاءَ وَجَعَلَكُمْ مُلُوكًا (المائدة-٢٠)

"Remember Moses said to his people: 'O my people! call in rememberence the favour of Allah unto you, when He produced Prophets among you, made you kings.....'" (15:20)

The above discussion makes it clear that the *khilāfah*, infact, depends upon the will of Allah and the fundamental duty of the *khalīfah* is merely to enforce the will of Allah, that is why, as observed in the Qur'anic verses, those people were destroyed and eliminated from the scene who commit, against the command of Allah and the teachings of their Prophets.

Notes and References:

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3. *Ibid.* p. 450
4. *Ibid.* p. 451
5. Qurtubi, *al-Jami al-Ahkām al-Qur'ān*, Cairo, Vol. I, p.225.
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Syed Suliaman Nadvi, Amin Ahsan Islahi, Syed Ahmad Akbar Abadi, Wahiduddin Khan and some others as cited by Sabihuddin Ansari; *op. cit.*, pp. 35-45.
6. Qurtubi, *op. cit.*, Beirut, Vol. XV, p. 188; Ibn Kathi, *op. cit.*
Vol. IV, p.32; Daryabadi, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Eng. tr.
Vol, IV, p.49; Mawdudi, *op. cit.* Vol. IV, p. 327
7. cf Tabari, *op. cit.*, Vol.I, pp. 449-51
8. *Ibid.*, p. 452.
9. Qurtubi, *op.cit.*, Vol. III, p. 224-25.
Ibn Kathir, *op.cit.*, Vol. III, p. 371.
10. Tabari, *op.cit.*, Vol. XII, pp. 287-88; Vol. XV, pp.38-39; Ibn Kathir,
op.cit., Vol.I, pp.199-200; Vol.II,p.409; Vol. III, p.560; Qurtubi,
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11. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Glorious Qur'an*, Madina, p.551
12. *Ibid.*, p.1025
13. Abdul Majid Daryabadi, *op.cit.*, Vol. III, p. 235; Syed Sulaiman Nadvi also-establishes the
same view, as held by Daryabadi, *Sirat al-Nabi*, Dar al-Musanifeen, 1947, Vol.III, p. 493
14. Muhammad Fawud, *al-Mujam al-Fihris Li Alfāz al-Qur'ān*
15. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *op.cit.*, p. 1093
16. Tabari, *op.cit.*, Vol. V, p. 306
17. *Ibid.*