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‘The rightly-guided caliphs: the range of views preserved in hadith’
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My problem here is the range of views preserved in early Sunni hadith collections as to ‘the rightly-guided caliphs’ (*al-khulafā' al-rāshidūn*), meaning most broadly those of the successors to Muḥammad as head of state whose words and deeds were especially reliable as guides to belief and conduct.¹ These collections were assembled in the mid-ninth century CE. There are two aspects to the problem. First is to go back a hundred years or so to see what led up to the situation in the mid-ninth century. Second is how to interpret remaining diversity in the mid-ninth century. A major theoretical desideratum is to disentangle the two problems of the caliphate and preference. *Al-Khilāfah*, the caliphate, is the problem of who was a caliph, who not. The major question here was whether `Alī was the fourth after the Prophet or Mu`āwiyah. *Al-Taḍdīl*, preference, was the problem of who was best after the Prophet. Was `Alī better than `Uthmān? than Ṭalḥah and al-Zubayr?²

As for views in the century before the mid-800s, we have a review from Aḥmad ibn Sa`īd al-Dārimī (d. 253/867-8):³

¹ The full expression in the relevant hadith report, implicitly assumed here, is *al-khulafā' al-rāshidūn al-mahdīyūn*, meaning ‘the rightly guiding and guided caliphs’, on which more below. In context, confirmed by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal’s comments, their status as guiding, not just guided, was crucial.

² The regional dynamics of different positions on the caliphate were opened up above all by Wilferd Madelung, *Der Imam al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen*, Studien zur Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients, n.F. 1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1965). The theological parties of the eighth and earlier ninth centuries have also been masterfully surveyed by Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, 6 vols (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991-5). I shall make comparisons here with a convenient précis, Josef van Ess, ‘Political ideas in early Islamic religious thought’, *British journal of Middle Eastern studies* 28 (2001): 151-64.

³ Ḥarb al-Kirmānī, *Masā'il al-imām Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal wa-Iṣḥāq ibn Rāhūyah*, ed. Nāṣir ibn Sa`ūd ibn `Abd Allāh al-Salāmah (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1425), 441.

The jurists disagreed. Among them were those who said Abū Bakr and `Umar, then stopped. Among them were al-Sha`bī [Kufan, d. after 100/718-19], Ibrāhīm [Kufan, d. 96/714?], and the Kufans, Sa`īd ibn Jubayr [Kufan, d. 95/714?], Abū al-Bakhtarī [Kufan cl., d. 83/702-3], and others; also `Ubayd ibn `Umayr [Meccan *qāṣṣ*, d. bef. 73/692-3] and a number of the people of Basra who stopped. A number said Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, and `Alī. There was a group called the Shi`ah who were not rebels or associated with innovation who said Abū Bakr, `Umar, and `Alī. There was a group called the `Uthmānīyah who said Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, then fell silent. Among them were Sa`īd ibn Abī `Arūbah [Basran cl., d. 156/772-3?], Ḥammād ibn Zayd [Basran, d. 179/795-6], Hishām ibn Abī `Abd Allāh [al-Dastuwā`ī, Basran Qadari, d. 154/770-1], and others. There was a group of the people of Basra who would not choose between `Alī and `Uthmān. Among them were Yahyā ibn Sa`īd [al-Qaṭṭān, d. 198/813], Sulaymān al-Taymī [ibn Tarkhān, d. 143/760-1], Mu`tamir ibn Sulaymān [d. 187/802-3], and Khālīd ibn al-Ḥārith [d. 186/802].

‘Those who said Abū Bakr and `Umar, then stopped’ effectively held there were just two rightly-guided caliphs. To judge by *isnāds*, this position was most popular in Kufa. By a Kufan *isnād*, `Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad quotes `Alī himself in support of such a theory: ‘The Messenger of God preceded (everyone else). He put Abū Bakr in charge of the prayer. He made `Umar the third. After that, we were a group struck by the tribulation (*fitnah*) of what God willed.’⁴ (It is surprising to see `Umar described as the third, not the second. He did come third as head of the Islamic state. Perhaps the formula is archaic, reflecting a time when propagandists for the Umayyads extolled the caliphate as virtually equal to prophethood.⁵)

`Alī is quoted as saying that Abū Bakr and `Umar had a covenant with the Messenger of God, he and `Uthmān only with the people.⁶ And the Kufan *mukhaḍram* Ṣa`ṣa`ah ibn Ṣūḥān (d. after 40/661), is quoted as saying in a sermon that God chose Abū Bakr and `Umar, the

⁴ `Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad, *al-Sunnah*, ed. `Abd Allāh ibn Ḥasan ibn Ḥusayn (Mecca: al-Maṭba`ah al-Salafīyah, 1349), 199, five other versions 201-3, 211 = ed. Abū Ḥājir Muḥammad Sa`īd ibn Basyūnī Zaghlūl (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-`Ilmīyah, 1405/1985), 229, five other versions 230, 232, 240 (references to the latter edition henceforth in *italics*). Ibn Sa`d quotes `Alī to similar effect, *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, ed. Eduard Sachau, &al., 9 vols in 15 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1904-40), 6:89 = *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 9 vols (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957-68), 6:130 (references to the latter edition henceforth in *italics*).

⁵ Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's caliph: religious authority in the first centuries of Islam*, University of Cambridge Oriental publications 37 (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1986), 26-32. But compare also a report from the Prophet blamed on an unreliable transmitter of the early ninth century: ‘I am the first, Abū Bakr the second, and `Umar the third, while the people after us will be one after another’: Ibn `Adī al-Qaṭṭān, *al-Kāmil fī ḍu`afā` al-rijāl*, ed. `Adil Aḥmad `Abd al-Mawjūd & `Alī Muḥammad Mu`awwad, 9 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-`Ilmīyah, 1418/1997), 2:96

⁶ `Abd Allāh, *Sunnah*, 191-2 220-1.

people `Uthmān.⁷ Likewise through Kufan *isnāds*, the Prophet is widely quoted as saying, ‘Follow the lead of (*iqṭadū bi-*) those two after me, Abū Bakr and `Umar.’⁸ `Ā’ishah is quoted as saying, mainly by Kufan *isnāds*, ‘The Messenger of God . . . was taken away without having appointed a successor. The Messenger of God said, “If I were to appoint a successor, I would appoint Abū Bakr and `Umar.”’⁹

According to Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, ‘The people of Kufa prefer `Alī to `Uthmān save for two men: Ṭalḥah ibn Muṣarrif [d. 112/730-1?] and `Abd Allāh ibn Idrīs [d. 192/807-8].’ Asked whether Zubayd al-Yāmī (d. 122/739-40?) was not another, he said ‘No, he used to love `Alī’, meaning (presumably `Abd Allāh’s gloss) he preferred `Alī to `Uthmān.¹⁰ It may seem odd, then, for Kufa to be the centre of a two-caliphs hypothesis. My guess would be that, `Alī having such strong support in Kufa, a two-caliphs hypothesis was the safest option for Kufan supporters of the Umayyads, or at least quietists who resisted active opposition to the Umayyads. Al-Sha`bī was characterized as taking a strong position against the Shī`ah, meaning those who preferred `Alī to `Uthmān and probably also those who thought the rightful caliphs after `Alī were descendants of his. ‘If the Shī`ah were among the birds,’ he is quoted as saying, ‘they would be vultures. If they were among the beasts, they would be asses.’¹¹ Ibn Idrīs’ preference for `Uthmān may have been an assertion of independence of

⁷ `Abd Allāh, *Sunnah*, 193-4 223.

⁸ `Abd Allāh, *Sunnah*, 208-9 238; Aḥmad, *al-Musnad*, 6 vols (Cairo: al-Maṭba`ah al-Maymanīyah, 1313/1895), 5:382, 385, 402 = ed. Shu`ayb al-Arna`ūt, &al., 50 vols (Beirut: Mu`assasat al-Risālah, 1413-21/1993-2001), 38:280-2, 309-11, 418-19 (references to the latter edition henceforth in *italics*); al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi`*, *al-manāqib* 37, no 3805; Ibn Mājah, *al-Sunan*, *al-sunnah* 11, *fi faḍā`il aṣḥāb rasūl Allāh*, no 97; Ibn Sa`d, *Ṭabaqāt* 2/2:98 2:334; Ibn Abī Shaybah, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, ed. Ḥamad `Abd Allāh al-Jum`ah & Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Luḥayḍān, 16 vols (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1425/2004), 11:104 = ed. Muḥammad `Awwāmah, 26 vols (Jedda: Dār al-Qiblah & Damascus: Mu`assasat `Ulūm al-Qur`ān, 1427/2006), 17:35-6 (references to the latter edition henceforth in *italics*).

⁹ Al-Nasā`ī, *al-Sunan al-kubrā* (henceforth *SK*), *al-manāqib* 2, *faḍl Abī Bakr wa-`Umar*, no 8118.

¹⁰ Aḥmad, *K. al-`Ilal wa-ma`rifat al-rijāl*, ed. Waṣī Allāh ibn Muḥammad `Abbās, 4 vols (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1988). 2:535 = ed. Muḥammad Ḥusām Bayḍūn, 2 vols (Beirut: Mu`assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyah, 1410/1990), 2:47 (references to the latter edition henceforth in *italics*); also Ṣāliḥ ibn Aḥmad, *Masā`il al-imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, ed. Ṭāriq ibn `Awaḍ Allāh ibn Muḥammad (Riyadh: Dār al-Waṭan, 1420/1999), 210, with a similar gloss.

¹¹ Ibn Sa`d, *Ṭabaqāt* 6:173 6:248; `Abd Allāh, *Sunnah*, 193 222, with more instances, 193 222-3. On al-Sha`bī’s loyalty to the Umayyads, see Steven C. Judd, *Religious scholars and the Umayyads*, Culture and civilization in the Middle East 40 (London: Routledge, 2014), 41-51.

the `Abbāsids, also perhaps disdain for Kufa. He was known for being close to the scholars of Medina, normally allied with the Basrans.

Al-Dārimī's first proponents of a three-caliph hypothesis are 'the `Uthmānīyah who said Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, then fell silent'. A hadith report with a Basran *isnād* states 'that the Messenger of God . . . ascended Uḥud with Abū Bakr, `Umar, and `Uthmān. It shook them, whereupon the Prophet of God . . . said, "Be firm, Uḥud, for on you are only a prophet, a saint, and two martyrs."'¹² A yet more prominent hadith report quotes Ibn `Umar with a Medinese/Baghdadi *isnād*: 'We used to, in the time of the Prophet . . . , consider no one equal to Abū Bakr, then `Umar, then `Uthmān. Then we would leave the Companions of the Prophet . . . , not preferring any to another.'¹³ `Alī himself is made to imply that Abū Bakr, `Umar, and `Uthmān were the best Muslims after the Prophet, in descending order, by Ibn Abī `Āṣim (both Kufan and Basran *isnāds*).¹⁴

To the same effect is a longer story from Ibn `Umar (Medinese *isnād*):¹⁵

The Messenger of God . . . took a ring of gold or silver and put its jewel (*faṣṣ*) next to his palm. Its inscription was 'Muḥammad is the Messenger of God.' The people took up the like of that. When he saw that they had taken them up, he threw his away, saying, 'I will never wear it.' Then he took up a ring of silver, so the people took up rings of silver. There wore the ring after the Prophet . . . Abū Bakr, then `Umar, then `Uthmān, till it fell from `Uthmān in the well of Arīs.

¹² Tirmidhī, *manāqib* 18, *manāqib `Uthmān ibn `Affān*, no 3697; sim., Ibn Abī `Āṣim, *al-Sunnah*, ed. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, 2 vols (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1400/1980), 2:594 = (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1424/2004), 300 (references to the latter edition henceforth in *italics*), with the scene shifted from Uḥud near Medina to Thubayr near Mecca. Cf. van Ess, 'Political ideas', 155.

¹³ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, *faḍā'il aṣḥāb al-nabī* 7, *bāb manāqib `Uthmān ibn `Affān*, no 3698; sim., no 3655. Also Abū Dāwūd, *al-Sunan*, *al-sunnah* 7, *bāb fī al-tafḍīl*, nos 4627-8; Ibn Hānī, *Masā'il al-imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, ed. Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh, 2 vols (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1400), 2:170; `Abd Allāh., *Sunnah*, 206-8 236-7 (11 versions, in one of which, however, with a Kufan *isnād*, Ibn `Umar mentions only Abū Bakr and `Umar; the same in Ibn Abī Shaybah, 11:102 17:31-2); Ibn Abī `Āṣim, *Sunnah* 2:539 264 (in which, uniquely, Ibn `Umar specifies that this is with regard to the caliphate; Medinese *isnād*). Cf. Ibn Abī `Āṣim, *Sunnah* 2:569-71 276-8 (Syrian/Medinese *isnād*, Abū Hurayrah instead of Ibn `Umar).

¹⁴ Ibn Abī `Āṣim, *Sunnah* 2:569-70 277.

¹⁵ Bukhārī, *al-libās* 6, *bāb khātām al-fiḍḍah*, no 5866. Sim., Muslim, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-libās wa-al-zīnah* 12, *lubs al-nabī* . . . *khātaman min wariq*, no 2091; Abū Dāwūd, *al-Sunan*, k. *al-khātām* 1, no 4218; al-Nasā'ī, *al-Mujtabā*, k. *al-zīnah* 53, *naz' al-khātām 'inda dukhūl al-khalā'*, no 5220; idem, *SK*, *al-zīnah* 73, *dhikr ikhtilāf al-fāz al-nāqilīn li-khabar Nāfi' `an Ibn `Umar fī khātām al-dhahab*, nos 9048, 9550; Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* 1/2:162-3, 165 1:472-3, 476-7; Ibn Abī Shaybah, 8:340 12:583-4.

One version from Ibn Sa'd recounts how it was on the hand of 'Uthmān for precisely six years before being lost in the well. The *isnād* suggests that this was a Basran interpretation, connecting the loss of the ring with the theory that 'Uthmān's caliphate comprised six good years and six bad years.¹⁶ Another version, likewise Basran, states that the ring remained on 'Uthmān's hand so long as he did the work of his two predecessors.¹⁷

Another, apparently opposing version with a Kufan *isnād* goes back to a Shī'i imam, 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn (Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, d. Medina, 95/714): 'The ring of the Messenger of God . . . was with Abū Bakr and 'Umar. When 'Uthmān took it, it fell and was lost. 'Alī . . . inscribed his own inscription.'¹⁸ This is apparently to recognize the legitimacy of Abū Bakr and 'Umar, in the Zaydi style, while rejecting 'Uthmān. Yet another opposing report with a Medinese *isnād* goes back to Sa'īd ibn al-Musayyab (d. 94/712-13?): 'The Messenger of God . . . did not wear a ring (*mā takhattama*) until he met God. Neither did Abū Bakr until he met God, nor 'Umar until he met God, nor 'Uthmān until he met God.'¹⁹

There is also a three-caliphs tradition that finds Abū Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthmān all legitimate caliphs but decreasing in virtue. Here is one example recounted by Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī, and al-Nasā'ī with a Basran *isnād*:²⁰

Prophet: 'Who of you has had a dream?' A man: 'I dreamt as if a scale came down from Heaven. You and Abū Bakr were weighed on it. You outweighed him. Abū Bakr and 'Umar were weighed, Abū Bakr outweighing ('Umar). 'Umar and 'Uthmān were weighed, 'Umar outweighing ('Uthmān).' Abū Bakrah: 'We saw dislike on the face of the Messenger of God . . . '

This report endorses the classical order of preference (*tafḍīl*) among the first three. Perhaps the Prophet disliked what he heard because he knew things would only get worse from there.

¹⁶ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* 1/2:165 1:476-7.

¹⁷ Ibn Abī 'Āṣim, *Sunnah* 2:542 265.

¹⁸ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* 1/2:165 1:477.

¹⁹ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* 1/2:166 1:477-8.

²⁰ Abū Dāwūd, *al-sunnah* 8, *bāb fī al-khulafā'*, nos 4634-5 (also a third version, no 4636, in which it is the Prophet's own dream); Tirmidhī, *abwāb al-ru'yah* 10, *bāb mā jā'a fī ru'yā al-nabī . . . fī al-mīzān wa-al-dalw*, no 2287; Nasā'ī, *SK*, *al-manāqib* 3, *faḍā'il Abī Bakr wa-'Umar wa-'Uthmān*, no 8136. Other versions of the story of three caliphs weighed against each other, sometimes with Kufan *isnāds*, at Ibn Abī Shaybah, 10:327-8, 11:108-9 16:40-3, 17:46-7, and Aḥmad, *Musnad* 2:76 9:338-9.

Another example, recounted in Aḥmad's *Musnad* also with a Basran *isnād*, includes an interpretation by the Prophet:²¹

The Messenger of God liked a good dream. He would ask about it. One day, the Messenger of God said, 'Which of you has dreamt a dream?' A man said, 'I, O Messenger of God. I saw as if a scale were sent down from the sky. You were weighed on it against Abū Bakr, whom you outweighed. Then Abū Bakr was weighed against `Umar, whom he outweighed. Then `Umar was weighed against `Uthmān, whom he outweighed. Then the scale was drawn up.' The Messenger of God . . . was displeased by this. He said, 'The succession to prophethood (*khilāfat nubūwah*), then God will give power (*mulk*) to whomever he pleases.'

Again we have the classical order of preference among the first three, also a limitation of righteous succession to the first three, making `Alī no better than Mu`āwiyah and the Umayyads after him—indeed, making it a matter of indifference whether one recognized `Alī as a caliph at all or dismissed him as merely an unsuccessful pretender.

More negative about `Uthmān is this account of a dream from the Prophet himself (Basran *isnād*):²²

I saw as if a bucket descended from the sky. Abū Bakr came and took it by its handles, drinking from it a weak draught . . . Then `Umar came and took it by its handles and drank till he was full. Then `Uthmān came and took it by its handles and drank till he was full. But it shook, so some of it spilt onto him.

Here are three righteous caliphs, but `Uthmān is besmirched, perhaps for being overly eager to take power. I infer in the end that the three-caliphs hypothesis of Abū Bakr, `Umar, and `Uthmān had its strongest support in Basra with opposition from different directions in Kufa and Medina. (This slightly qualifies van Ess's assertion that the three-caliph hypothesis, recognizing Abū Bakr, `Umar, and `Uthmān, prevailed in Basra and Medina.²³ Of course, there were characteristically majority and minority views in each centre.)

²¹ Aḥmad, *Musnad* 5:44 34:94-7; sim., 5:50 34:140-2.

²² Aḥmad, *Musnad* 5:21 33:384-6. Cf. Ibn Abī Shaybah, 10:329 16:43-4 (Medinese *isnād*, Abū Bakr and `Umar only); Abū Dāwūd, *al-sunnah* 8, *bāb fī al-khulafā'*, no 4637 (Basran *isnād*, Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, and `Alī, the last of whom is the one besmirched); sim., Ibn Abī `Āṣim, *Sunnah* 2:540 264.

²³ Van Ess, 'Political ideas', 155.

As indicated by al-Dārimī and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, there were others, especially Kufan, who held to an alternative three-caliphs hypothesis, mainly that Abū Bakr, `Umar, and `Alī were three rightly-guided caliphs.²⁴ `Abd al-Razzāq includes a hadith report from `Abd Allāh ibn Mas`ūd apparently endorsing this list:²⁵

I was with the Prophet . . . the night when the delegation of *jinn* came to him. He breathed, so I said, 'What is with you, O Messenger of God?' He said, 'I have been told of my own death, O Ibn Mas`ūd.' I said, 'So appoint a successor.' He said, 'Whom?' I said, 'Abū Bakr.' He was silent. Some time passed, then he breathed. I said, 'What is with you, O Messenger of God?' He said, 'I have been told of my own death, O Ibn Mas`ūd.' I said, 'So appoint a successor.' He said, 'Whom?' I said, 'Umar.' He was silent. Some time passed, then he breathed. I said, 'What is with you, O Messenger of God?' He said, 'I have been told of my own death, O Ibn Mas`ūd.' I said, 'So appoint a successor.' He said, 'Whom?' I said, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.' He said, 'By him in whose hand is my soul, if they obey him, they will all enter Paradise, every one.'

On the whole, though, it is difficult to find express Kufan endorsements of a three-caliphs hypothesis, Abū Bakr, `Umar, then `Alī, in Sunni hadith collections.

`Abd al-Razzāq fits into 'a group called the Shi`ah who were not rebels or associated with innovation'.²⁶ This is commonly identified as the Zaydi position, and is probably what Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 380/990?) has in mind when he says of the Zaydiyyah, 'most of the traditionists upheld this position, such as Sufyān ibn `Uyaynah, Sufyān al-Thawrī, and Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥayy and his sons.'²⁷ As late as Ibn Ḥajar, Sunni authors distinguished between *tashayyu`*, a forgivable preference for `Alī over `Uthmān, and *rafḍ*, preference for `Alī over Abū Bakr and `Umar, which may put one outside the community. Moreover, the seriousness

²⁴ As observed by van Ess, 'Political ideas', 155.

²⁵ `Abd al-Razzāq, *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A`zamī, Min Manshūrāt al-Majlis al-`Ilmī 39, 11 vols (Johannesburg: Majlis Ilmi, 1390-2/1970-21), 1:317-18.

²⁶ A detailed study concludes plausibly that `Abd al-Razzāq's Shi`ism was fairly mild, extending to the occasional denigration of `Uthmān and possibly those who fought against `Alī but not to the wholesale rejection of the Companions: Asmā' Ibrāhīm Sa`ūd `Ajīn, *Manhaj al-ḥāfiẓ `Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan`ānī* (Amman: al-Dār al-`Uthmāniyah and Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Islāmiyah, 1429/2008), 79-91.

²⁷ Ibn al-Nadīm, *K. al-Fihrist, maqālah 5, fann 6*; ed. Gustav Flügel with Johannes Roedigger and August Mueller (Leipzig: F. C. W. Vogel, 1872), 178. The sources tend to agree as to Ṣāliḥ ibn Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥayy (d. 153/770), little is said of the theological position of Ibn `Uyaynah (d. 198/814), while a wide variety of positions are ascribed to Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/777?), which I will not detail here. All three started out in Kufa, although Ibn `Uyaynah died in Mecca, al-Thawrī in Basra.

of preferring `Alī might depend on whether one actively promoted such a preference.

According to the Ḥanbali qadi Abū Ya`lá ibn al-Farrā` (d. 458/1065), for example, a witness was not disqualified for preferring `Alī to the three unless he was an active propagandist.²⁸

Surprisingly, al-Dārimī ends with Basrans who would not choose between `Alī and `Uthmān, with examples from the mid- to late eighth century. On the face of it, this is the position of the early Murji`ah, *al-murji`ah al-ūlá*, who refrained from saying whether either `Uthmān or `Alī was a believer.²⁹ Ibn Sa`d mentions of the Kufan qadi Muḥārib ibn Dithār (d. 116/734-5?), 'He was among the first Murji`ah, who put off (*yurjūna*) a decision concerning `Alī and `Uthmān, not testifying to either faith or infidelity.'³⁰ To refrain from saying is the express position of Fiqh Akbar I, the short creed usually attributed to Abū Muṭṭ` al-Balkhī (al-Ḥakam ibn `Abd Allāh ibn Maslamah, d. 199/814?), a qadi who claimed to relate it from Abū Ḥanīfah himself.³¹ Abū Muṭṭ` was early denounced as a Murji`. ³² The Waṣīyah attributed to Abū Ḥanīfah endorses the position of the later Murji`ah concerning faith, that it neither increases nor decreases, but takes what became the orthodox Sunni position concerning the caliphs, namely that Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, and `Alī were the best of the Muslims after the Prophet, in descending order.³³

To my surprise, I have not found independent confirmation that Yaḥyá ibn Sa`īd al-Qaṭṭān, Sulaymān al-Taymī, Mu`tamir ibn Sulaymān, and Khālīd ibn al-Ḥārith (all highly

²⁸ Al-Mardāwī, *al-Inṣāf fī ma`rifat al-rājiḥ min al-khilāf*, ed. Muḥammad Hāmid al-Fiḳī, 12 vols (Cairo: Maṭba`at al-Sunnah al-Muḥammadiyah, 1955-8, repr. n.p.: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-`Arabī, 1419/1998), 12:36.

²⁹ Michael Cook argues that this tendency originated in Kufa in opposition to Kufan Shi'ism: 'Activism and quietism in Islam: the case of the early Murji`a', *Islam and power*, ed. Alexander S. Cudsi and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, Croom Helm ser. on the Arab world (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 15-23. This agrees with my supposition concerning the two-caliphs hypothesis.

³⁰ Ibn Sa`d, *Ṭabaqāt* 6:214 6:307.

³¹ A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim creed* (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1932; repr. New Delhi: Oriental Books reprint Corp., 1979), 104. On Abū Muṭṭ`, see Ibn Abī l-Wafā', *Al-Jawāhir al-muḍīyah fī ṭabaqāt al-ḥanaḥīyah*, ed. `Abd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥulw, 5 vols (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-`Arabīyah, 1398-1408/1978-88, repr. Giza: Hajr, 1413/1993), 4:87-8, also al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-islām*, ed. `Umar `Abd al-Salām Tadmurī, 52 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-`Arabī, 1407-21/1987-2000), 14:158-60, with further references, and van Ess, *Theologie* 2:536-9.

³² Ibn Sa`d, *Ṭabaqāt* 7/2:106 7:374. See also Ibn Abī Ḥatīm, *K. al-Jarḥ wa-al-ta`dīl*, 9 vols (Hyderabad: Jam`iyat Dā'irat al-Ma`ārif al-`Uthmāniyah, 1360-71, repr. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-`Arabī, n.d.), 3:122.

³³ Wensinck, *Muslim creed*, 125, 127. As to who actually came up with it, Wensinck will say no more than that it originated some time before the mid-ninth century (*Muslim creed*, 187).

reputable traditionists) actually took the position ascribed to them by al-Dārimī, namely refusal to decide between `Uthmān and `Alī. To the contrary, Ibn Sa`d states that Sulaymān al-Taymī inclined towards `Alī.³⁴ Aḥmad ascribes neutrality as between `Uthmān and `Alī to his teacher Yazīd ibn Hārūn (Wasiti client, d. 206/821-2), or at least that he said *ahl al-sunnah* were not to be blamed if they preferred one or the other of `Uthmān and `Alī.³⁵

There seem to have been four stages to the development of the `Uthmānīyah, the group named by al-Dārimī: (1) loyalists opposed to `Alī, (2) supporters of the three-caliphs hypothesis, (3) supporters of the four-caliphs hypothesis with `Uthmān the third best, `Alī the fourth, finally (4) a shadowy, evanescent pro-Umayyad party.³⁶ Al-Dārimī's description fits stage two. His examples of shaykhs who endorsed this ranking are all Basrans of the later eighth century. Similarly, Ibn Sa`d applies the term *`uthmānī* mainly to Basrans of the later eighth century: `Abd Allāh ibn `Awn (d. 151/768?), Ḥammād ibn Zayd (d. 179/795), Yazīd ibn Zuray` (d. Basra, 182/798), and Bishr ibn al-Mufaḍḍal (d. 186/802).³⁷ Ibn Sa`d applies the term more sparingly outside Basra: to the Egyptian Mu`āwiyah ibn Ḥudayj (fl. 1st/7th cent.) and the Kufan Abū Ḥaṣīn (d. 128/745-6?).³⁸

In the middle, but without any named examples, al-Dārimī puts those who upheld the four-caliphs hypothesis: the first four, righteous caliphs were in order Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, and `Alī. Al-Dārimī does not distinguish between the caliphate and preference, but the classical Sunni doctrine of preference ranked them in chronological order as to virtue as well as legitimate leadership of the community. This is famously expressed in the hadith report of Abū `Abd al-Raḥmān Saḥīnah, the Prophet's freedman (Basran *isnād*).³⁹

³⁴ Ibn Sa`d, *Ṭabaqāt* 7/2:18 7:253.

³⁵ Aḥmad, *ʿIlal* 3:473 2:272.

³⁶ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edn, s.v. 'Uthmāniyya', by P. Crone.

³⁷ Ibn Sa`d, *Ṭabaqāt* 7/2:24-5, 42, 44-5 7:261-2, 286, 289-90.

³⁸ Ibn Sa`d, *Ṭabaqāt* 6:224, 7/2:195 6:321, 7:503.

³⁹ Abū Dāwūd, *al-sunnah* 8, *bāb fī al-khulafāʾ*, no 4646; sim., Tirmidhī, *al-fitan* 48, *bāb mā jāʾa fī al-khilāfah*, no 2226, also Nasāʾī, *SK*, *manāqib* 5, *Abū Bakr wa-ʿUmar wa-ʿUthmān wa-ʿAlī*, no 8155; Aḥmad, *Musnad* 5:220-1 36:248-50, 252-3, 256-7. Cf. `Abd Allāh, *Sunnah*, 215 244, where Saḥīnah expressly counts six years for `Alī and denies that the Marwānids are caliphs, and Abū Dāwūd al-Ṭayālīsī, *Musnad Abī Dāwūd al-Ṭayālīsī*

Prophet: 'Succession to prophecy (*khilāfat nubūwah*) will be for 30 years, then God will give power (*al-mulk*) or his power (*mulkahu*) to whomever he wills.' Sa'īd (ibn Jumhān, d. Basra, 136/753-4) < Saḥīnah: 'Consider (*amsik `alayk*, literally 'hold onto') Abū Bakr at two years, `Umar ten, `Uthmān twelve, and `Alī so-and-so.' Sa'īd: 'I said to Saḥīnah, "Those assert that `Alī was not a caliph." She said, "The anuses of Banī al-Zarqā' have lied", meaning Banī Marwān.'

This is the hadith report to which Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal appeals:⁴⁰

The *sunnah* with regard to *tafḍīl*, which we endorse, is what is related of Ibn `Umar, saying Abū Bakr, then `Umar, then `Uthmān. As for the caliphate, we go by the hadith report of Saḥīnah, saying Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, and `Alī among the caliphs. We harmonize (*nasta`mil*) the two hadith reports. We do not rebuke anyone who makes `Alī the fourth on account of his blood and marriage relationships, his early conversion, and his probity.

Another story of the Prophet and his most important Companions on a mountain that shakes is this (Medinese *isnād*):⁴¹

The Messenger of God . . . was on Mount Ḥirā' along with Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, `Alī, Ṭalḥah, and al-Zubayr. The rock moved. The Messenger of God . . . said, 'Be still, for there is no one on you but a prophet, a saint, or a martyr.'

This incident is placed outside Mecca rather than Medina. It represents most closely the mature Sunni position that not only are Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, and `Alī all righteous, but likewise the Companions such as Ṭalḥah and al-Zubayr who opposed `Alī. They could be equally righteous because their opposition was entirely political, not religious, politics and religion being entirely separate concerns. (Sunni dogma on this point is of course opposed by Shi'i dogma, which holds that opposition to `Alī was intensely religious.) A variant mentions Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ as well. Another variant, mentioning the first four caliphs of the Sunnis, Ṭalḥah, al-Zubayr, `Abd al-Raḥmān ibn `Awf, and Sa'īd ibn Zayd, was blamed on the Kufan

(Hyderabad: Maṭba'at Majlis Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-Nizāmīyah, 1321, repr. Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 151, no 1107, where Saḥīnah expressly names Mu'āwiyah as first of the kings.

⁴⁰ `Abd Allāh, *Sunnah*, 214 243. But Aḥmad is also quoted as making Ibn `Umar identify the caliphs as Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, and `Alī: `Abd Allāh, *Sunnah*, 206 235. There is some disagreement over exactly where Aḥmad put `Alī. See Christopher Melchert, 'A response to Saud Al-Sarhan's "The creeds of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal"', *Books and bibliophiles: studies in honour of Paul Auchterlonie*, ed. Robert Gleave (n.p.: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2014), 45-50, at 46-7.

⁴¹ Muslim, *faḍā'il al-ṣaḥābah* 6, *min faḍā'il Ṭalḥah wa-al-Zubayr*, no 2417; Tirmidhī, *manāqib* 18, *manāqib `Uthmān ibn `Affān*, no 3696; Nasā'ī, *SK*, *al-manāqib* 5, *Abū Bakr wa-`Umar wa-`Uthmān wa-`Alī*, no 8156.

Muḥammad ibn Ṭalḥah (d. 167/783-4).⁴² If its fabricator is indeed the man indicated, this provides a fairly early *terminus post quem* for the four-caliphs hypothesis in Kufan `Uthmāni circles; but it is very uncertain that it was transmitted from him in just these words.

Considering how common the term became later, it seems odd that Aḥmad is not quoted as upholding the four-caliphs hypothesis in terms of who was rightly guided. Most obviously, he would not because the report (through the Companion al-`Irbād ibn Sāriyah) that the Prophet enjoined obedience to the rightly-guided caliphs does not mention who they were.⁴³

It was Sunni dogma, of course, that the Prophet never appointed a successor; hence, among other things, a quotation such as, “If I were to appoint a successor” The Rāfiḍi position was that prophets and imams do on the contrary appoint their successors. They hold that the Prophet clearly designated of `Alī as his successor at Ghadīr Khumm, where the Prophet said, ‘Of whomever I am the patron (*mawlā*), `Alī also is his patron.’ The story of Ghadīr Khumm appears in some Sunni collections as well as Shi`i, but it is interpreted as having to do with the division of spoils, not the caliphate.⁴⁴ Ibn Abī Shaybah apparently quotes a Meccan tradition by which `Uthmān used similar language of `Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr: refusing to go out to fight the rebellious Egyptians, `Uthmān declared, ‘Whoever owes hearkening and obedience to me, let him obey `Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr.’⁴⁵ Ibn al-Zubayr would go on to fight against `Alī at the Battle of the Camel and was widely recognized as caliph in succession to Yazīd, before he was overthrown by the Marwānids. The quotation suggests how the `Uthmānīyah might be anti-Umayyad.

⁴² Ibn `Adī al-Qaṭṭān, *Kāmil* 7:475.

⁴³ Abū Dāwūd, *al-sunnah* 5, *bāb fī luzūm al-sunnah*, no 4607; Tirmidhī, *abwāb al-`ilm* 16, *bāb mā jā`a fī al-akhḍh bi-al-sunnah wa-ijtināb al-bida`*, no 2676; Ibn Mājah, *al-sunnah* 6, *bāb ittibā` sunnat al-khulafā` al-rāshidīn al-mahdīyīn*, nos 42-4; Dārimī, *Sunan*, *muqaddimah* 16, *bāb ittibā` al-sunnah*; Aḥmad, *Musnad* 4:126-7 28:367-7, 373-9.

⁴⁴ See Henri Laoust, ‘Le rôle de `Ali dans la *sira* chiite’, *Revue des études islamiques* 30 (1963): 7-26, at 25-6.

⁴⁵ Ibn Abī Shaybah, 14:187-8 21:299.

There is also a five-caliphs hypothesis, quoted by Abū Dāwūd of Sufyān al-Thawrī: ‘The caliphs are five: Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, `Alī, and `Umar ibn `Abd al-`Azīz.’⁴⁶ It seems to be specifically rejected in Abū Dāwūd’s collection of Aḥmad’s opinions:⁴⁷

I more than once heard Aḥmad asked, ‘It is said that whatever Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, and `Alī did was *sunnah*.’ He said, ‘Yes.’ Once, he said of the hadith report of the Messenger of God . . . , ‘Incumbent on you is my *sunnah* and that of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs (*al-khulafā’ al-rāshidīn*),’ ‘He called it *sunnah*.’ He was asked about `Umar ibn `Abd al-`Azīz but he said, ‘No.’ He was asked, ‘Was he not an *imām*?’ He said, ‘Yes (he was).’

`Umar ibn `Abd al-`Azīz was even sometimes named as one of three rightly-guided caliphs. Sa`īd ibn al-Musayyab, the prominent Medinese who reputedly denied that Abū Bakr and the others wore any ring, is also quoted as telling an obscure man named Ḥabīb as they stood on `Arafah, ‘The caliphs are just three.’ Ḥabīb asked him, ‘Who are the caliphs?’ Sa`īd said, ‘Abū Bakr, `Umar, and `Umar.’ Ḥabīb said, ‘These are Abū Bakr and `Umar, whom we know, but who is this third `Umar?’ Sa`īd said ‘If you live, you will meet him. If you die, he will come after you.’⁴⁸ An alternative story has a Mesopotamian monk at whose cell the caliph `Umar ibn `Abd al-`Azīz (r. 99-101/717-20) stayed recognize him as the just imam corresponding to Rajab. Someone explained that the sacred months were three in a row, corresponding to Abū Bakr, `Umar, and `Uthmān, then Rajab by itself, hence an unconventional four-caliphs hypothesis.⁴⁹ `Umar ibn `Abd al-`Azīz himself is quoted as endorsing the two-caliphs hypothesis: ‘Is it not that whatever the Messenger of God . . . and his two comrades (*ṣāhibāh*) laid down as *sunnah*, it is religion (*dīn*), which we take up and do not go beyond (*nantahī ilayh*)? Whatever anyone else laid down as a *sunnah*, we put it off (*nurji`uh*).’⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Abū Dāwūd, *al-sunnah* 7, *bāb fī al-taḥḍīr*, no 4631. For further examples, see Murād, ‘`Umar II’s view’, 53, n. 41.

⁴⁷ Abū Dāwūd, *K. Masā’il al-imām Aḥmad*, ed. Muḥammad Bahjah al-Bayṭār (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1353/1934, repr. Beirut: Muḥammad Amīn Damj, n.d.), 277.

⁴⁸ Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 292-356 (addition by `Abd Allāh); Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilyah* 5:256-7.

⁴⁹ Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 291-2 355-6.

⁵⁰ Abū Nu`aym, *Ḥilyah* 5:298.

There is also some ambiguity over the caliphate of al-Ḥasan ibn `Alī. Saḡinah's hadith report of thirty years sometimes mentions that `Alī's caliphate was six years, sometimes refrains. `Alī was acclaimed caliph in 35/656, assassinated in 40/661, so it may have been felt that counting out a full six (to make a full thirty from Abū Bakr's accession in 11/632) implied the caliphate of al-Ḥasan as well, which ended in 41/661. (Abū Dāwūd al-Ṭayālīsī's version anticipates the problem by expressly counting the caliphate of Abū Bakr and `Umar as twelve years and six months, so that al-Ḥasan's six months are not needed to make up the thirty.⁵¹)

When I am asked about the position of Islam on something, my answer is usually that it is a disputed question. This is a well-known feature of Islamic law: what is offered concerning most questions is not a single rule but a range of possibilities. The four-caliphs hypothesis definitely won out, defining Sunnism from the ninth century until today. From the point of view of a believer, it is possible to harmonize most of these reports: hadith about two and three caliphs describe a subset of the four, while preference for `Alī over `Uthmān was a forgivable error. From an historian's point of view, these different reports have to represent contending versions of orthodoxy, most of which were ultimately unsuccessful. (I think the evidence is strong that a two-caliphs hypothesis was prevalent in eighth-century Kufa, a three-caliphs in Basra; the evidence is perhaps weaker that the Murji' position evolved out of the two-caliphs, the Rāfiḡī later as one reaction to it.) What impresses me is the way the tradition preserves them side by side, one after another. Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī is particularly clear, presenting a section on preference, which begins with the first three in chronological order, then apparently a five-caliphs hypothesis, followed by a section on the caliphs that has hadith about three caliphs, then about four. Implicitly, upholders of all positions are orthodox adherents of the *Sunnah*. Indeed, this is just the approach of the

⁵¹ See above, n. 41.

earliest commentator on Abū Dāwūd's *Sunan*, al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 388/988?). He states by turns that Ibn `Umar's stopping at `Uthmān does not necessarily derogate `Alī, that Sufyān al-Thawrī once said that the Sunnis of Kufa thought the order of precedence was Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Alī, and `Uthmān, the Sunnis of Basra Abū Bakr, `Umar, `Uthmān, and `Alī (also that he himself was with the Kufans), that there were recent authorities who put Abū Bakr first from the point of view of Companionship, `Alī from the point of view of blood relationship, and so on.⁵² Centuries later, Ibn Ḥajar (d. 852/1449) would quote him with approval, although observing that Sunni opinion had since then settled (*taqarrara*) on preference for `Uthmān over `Alī.⁵³ Discouragement of indignation over such points seems to suggest also encouragement of political quietism.

⁵² Al-Khaṭṭābī, *Ma`ālim al-sunan*, ed. Muḥammad Rāghib al-Ṭabbākh, 4 vols in 3 (Aleppo, 1351-2/1932-4, repr. Beirut: al-Maktabah al-`Ilmīyah, 1401/1981), 4:302-3 = ed. `Abd al-Salām `Abd al-Shāfi Muḥammad, 4 vols in 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-`Ilmīyah, 1416/1996), 4:279-80.

⁵³ Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī bi-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ad k. *faḍā'il al-aṣḥāb* 7, *bāb manāqib `Uthmān*, no 3698.