

Children of Isaac or Ishmael? A Critical Examination of Abu Hurayrah's Narration on the Conquest of Constantinople

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Abstract: In his *Sahih*, Imam Muslim narrated that Abu Hurayrah spoke about the conquest of Constantinople based on a prophetic tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad in which he said: "The Hour will not rise until seventy thousand people from among the descents of Isaac conquer Constantinople." Some Hadith interpreters were confused on the use of "Sons of Isaac" arguing that the true phrase must be "The Sons of Ishmael" instead. This they argued is inferred from other Prophetic traditions who describe the army conquering Constantinople as being from the city of the Prophet, the Medina which implies that the conquering army is rather Arabs, the descent of Ishmael. In this paper we seek to discuss this confusion and clarify the points of dispute around the proper understanding of this tradition. Our inquiry shows the confusion is only superficial and there is no conflict between these different traditions. Such a result implies the unnecessary undermining of the position of Imam Muslim in his hadith collection. This research discusses the doubt some Hadith commentators of *Sahih Muslim* find and their conclusion that the memory of some Hadith narrators skipped a word. We shall highlight the context of the Hadith, examine the question of doubt and position, discuss the scholarly views on this question and see what preferable and most reasonable answer should solve the question under study.

Key words: Constantinople % Descents of Isaac % Descents of Ishmael % Medina % Conquest % Hadith
% Abu Hurayrah

INTRODUCTION

Ali ibn al-Madini (778 CE/161 AH - 849/234) states: "Mastery of the science of Hadith is half of knowledge." In this paper we intend to discuss the meaning of a hadith narrated on the authority of Abu Hurayra's concerning the conquest of Constantinople that ought to happen towards the end of time. Abu Hurayrah is reported that Prophet Muhammad has said: "You have heard of the city, one side of which is inclined and the other is on the

coast (Constantinople). They said: Yes, Allah's Apostle. Thereupon he said: The Last Hour will not come until seventy thousand people from Banu Isra'il attack it. When they land there, they will neither fight with weapons nor shower arrows but will only say: "There is no god but Allah and Allah is the Greatest," and one side of it will fall. Thawr (one of the narrators) said: I think that he said: The area on the coast. Then they will say for the second time: "There is no god but Allah and Allah is the Greatest," and the other side will also fall. They will say:

“There is no god but Allah is the Greatest,” and the gates will be opened for them and they will enter. They will be collecting spoils of war and distributing them among themselves when a noise will be heard and it will be said: Verily, the Dajjal has come. Thus they will leave everything there and turn to (confront) him” [1].

Context of the Hadith: Abu Hurayrah reported that Prophet Muhammad said: “Have you heard about a city whose one part in land and the other is on the sea?” They said: “Yes, O Messenger of Allah.” He said: “The Hereafter will not occur until it (the city) is conquered by seventy thousand from the sons of Isaac. If they come to it, they stay. They will not fight with weapons and they will not shoot an arrow. When they say: ‘There is no true God worthy of worship except Allah and Allah is the Greatest’, one of its sides would collapse. Then they say for the second time: ‘There is no true God worthy of worship except Allah and Allah is the Greatest’, they enter it and win it. While they are dividing the loots, a person will come to them shouting that the pseudo-Mesiah has come out. Consequently, they leave everything and return.” Thawr said: “what I know from the Prophet is that it is the part in sea.” This tradition was reported by Imam Muslim, (n.d), Al-Naisaburi, [2], Abu Awanah, (1998), on the authority of Thawr bin Zayd on Abu al-Ghayth on Abu Hurayrah.

Many other scholars supplemented this narration. In his two works, *al-Nukat the Ziraf 'ala al Atraf and Ithaf al-Maharah*, Ibn Hajar (1988) said that this report was narrated by Abu Qilabah al-Raqashi, on the authority of Bishr bin Mohammed on the authority of Salman bin Bilal from Suhayl on the authority of his father from Abu Hurayrah.” Ibn Hajar related this narration to Abu ‘Awanah and said: “When Abu ‘Awanah reported it in his authentic book, he stated the following: ‘I am afraid it might be wrong. It might be transmitted by Abu Sulaiman from Thawr from Abu al-Ghayth” [3]. Abu ‘Awanah might have transmitted this report using two different chains of narrators; one which he judged to be wrong while the other he views as sound and agreeable with the narration reported by Imam Muslim in his Sahih. There is also the dubious nature found in Abu Hurayrah’s hadith. The number of the conquerors of Constantinople should be seventy thousands from among the children of Isaac (*Banu Ishak*). Imam Muslim however transmitted another narration stating that the army conquering Constantinople will come from the city of Medina which implies their Arabs descents and their descend from the Prophet Ishmael.

Prior to any further discussion, it is worthwhile identifying the areas of agreement or dispute existing on this hadith in order to better comprehend the current debate. Some of the points of agreement on this question include the following: a) the Conquerors of Constantinople are Muslims, descents of Ishmael or Isaac; and b) Constantinople will only be conquered towards the end of time as prophesized by Prophet Muhammad. Imam Qurtubi (d.671 H / 1273 CE) said: “Constantinople has to be conquered. Conquering it is a sign of the Last Day as found in various narrations such as that reported on the authority of Tirmizi on Mu’adh bin Jabal that the Prophet Muhammad said: “The greatest Battle, conquest of Constantinople and the uprising of the Anti-Christ in seven months time.” He commented: this hadith is sound and authentic” [4].

The points of disagreements relate to the identity of the conquerors and whether they would be Romans from among the descendants of Isaac, or Arabs from among the descendants of Ishmael. Some have argued that those conquerors would be Arabs because they believe this hadith is about Arabs from among the descendants of Ishmael. They disagreed however, on the interpretation of the phrase “Sons of Isaac” in two distinct ways: a) While they confirmed the phrase they interpreted it differently. They argue that the relationship to Isaac is mentioned in the hadith because he is a paternal uncle. Imam Qurtubi adopted this opinion in his interpretation of the *Abridged Version of Imam Muslim*. Qurtubi said: “In this hadith the ‘*Children of Isaac*’ indicates Arabs who were related to their uncle. They were attributed to *Isaac* as if he were replacing their father. That is like when the Arabs say to the maternal uncle because the maternal uncle is seen as apparent” [4]. This was transmitted by both al-Maliki [5] and al-Sanusi, [6] who unfortunately provided no further explanation; b) They rejected the phrase ‘*Children of Isaac*’ arguing that it was not memorized by scholars of hadith and that the truth is the ‘*Children of Ishmael*’ instead.

To support further their position, they argue that the phrase used in the narration is rather the ‘*Children of Ishmael*’ and that the context of this Hadith and other narrations of the event of the conquest of Constantinople only indicate that the conquerors will be among the Arabs. They further argue that the Hadith which mentions the name of the city also make mention of the army conquering Constantinople and that will be coming from the City of Medina. Qadi Iyad ibn Musa (1083-1149) said: “In the references it is mentioned that they [conquerors] are the Children of Isaac” [7]. Some said: “The known and

reserved is that they come from the children of Ishmael. This is what can be inferred from the context of the hadith because it named the city Constantinople and does not describe the city in this hadith. This is the opinion of Imam Nawawi (1930), Jalal al-Din Suyuti [8] and Siddiq Hasan Khan [9]. Ibn Kathir states the following: "Some narrations mention the phrase '*from the Sons of Ishmael*'. This was supported by 'Iyad and some others [10]. This opinion was also supported by Hammud al-Twijri (1993) who did not wrong the narration of Imam Muslim. He said: "What indicates the meaning that the conquerors will be Arabs, descents of Ishmael is the hadith of *Dhu Makhbar* who reported that the Romans will address their leader in the following: "You do not worry about the borders of the Arabs" [11]. They then betray and gather for the battle; this implies that the battle will occur between the Arabs and the Romans.

Some believe that those who fight in the battle and those who will conquer Constantinople would be the same people. This conclusion is consolidated by 'Amr bin 'Awf's report according to which the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "Then the *rouqah* of Muslims, the people of Hijaz confront them" which indicates that they are the descendants of Ishmael and not of Isaac. This conclusion can equally be supported with the use of the phrase 'Sons of Ishmael' in the same hadith transmitted by Al-Mundhiri in his *Summarized Sahih Muslim*. It is possible that he might have read a true copy of Muslim with this narration, so he depended on it in abridging the Authentic Book [12].

The second statement requires adopting the superficial interpretation of the hadith. Supporters of this view argue that there is no reason to reject the phrase of the seventy thousands conquerors from among the descendants of Isaac who will become Muslims at the end of time, who will witness the conquest and whose number will reach seventy thousands. Ibn Kathir commented on the hadith which mentions that the hour will rise and the Romans will be most in number; He said: "This indicates that the Romans will accept Islam and that Constantinople may be conquered by a group of them as stated in this hadith which mentions their number of seventy thousand from among the descendants of Isaac ... although it is mentioned in some other narrations that the conquerors are from '*The Descendants of Ishmael*'. 'Iyadh and others [hadith experts] supported that. And only Allah knows" [13].

On the other hand, Imam al-Taiby in his commentary of this hadith, believes that the descendants are from among the descent of Issac. He said: "That is they are

from the Syrian Kurds who are descendants of Prophet Issac and are Muslims" [14]. Mohammad Taqi Uthmani observes: "I did not find in other narrations a clear statement that they are only from among the Arabs. Why can't we suggest that the army will involve a large number from among the descendants of Ishmael who will embrace Islam? In doing so, there would be no need to say there is an illusion or interpretation mentioned by Qurtubi" [15]. This opinion was also supported by some contemporary Muslim scholars like Hammam Abdur Rahim Sa'id (2003) and Mohammed Hammam Abdu Rahim who expresses their opinion as follows: "The phrase '*Descendants of Isaac*' as mentioned in Sahih Muslim need not be literally understood because a large number of Romans will embrace Islam. The Romans will then request the Muslims to let the non-Muslim Romans fight the Muslim ones who were captivated from them and those who were captivated of them; then they entered [the religion of] Islam and after that they captivated from us. Muslims would reject this offer. Those who will embrace Islam will reach seventy millions and will take part in the conquest of Constantinople" [1].

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

It is clear that the most apparent objective statement is that which requires the understanding of the Hadith on its surface meaning and that the seventy thousand people will be from among the descendants of Isaac. One first realizes that the hadith chain of narrators is sound and not defect (*ma'lul*) because no single scholar has raised no criticism about it in the works of hadith defection (*ta'ilil*). Adopting such statement will however require us to adopt the narration and not to reject it or abuse its interpretation. As far as the views and arguments associated with this first view, we may summarize them in the following: a) The phrase of "the descendants of Isaac" in this hadith is not mentioned by other renowned hadith experts; b) The context of the narrations of the conquest of Constantinople indicate that the army will come from Medina and that the army is Arab; c) Some hadiths use the phrase "*Descendants of Ishmael*" as been transmitted by Ibn Kathir and al-Mundhiri; and d) the hadith of "*Descendants of Isaac*" can be equally descendants of Ishmael because they were assigned to their uncle.

First View: As far as the first view is concerned, it cannot be agreed that this phrase is not memorized by famous scholars of hadith. Imam Qurtubi [4] for example reported

the consensus of the narrators of Sahih Muslim and the original copies of Imam Muslim's Sahih on this particular phrase. Even those who disagreed with them approved the same narration in all other original copies of Imam Muslim with the phrase of "The Descendants of Isaac". Qadi 'Iyad said: "It is so in all the original copies" [16]. Besides, the argument that a particular narration is not memorized by famous hadith scholar entails to the existence of two narrations; one more preferred than the other, i.e. the memorized one (*mahfuz*) by hadith scholars contradicting the odd hadith (*shadh*). The memorized narration however involves the trustworthy narrator contradicting the less trustworthy one [17]. A narration that it is not memorized necessitates its rejection and replacement with another contradictory narration because the narrators of the latter are determined to be more trustworthy than the narrators of the former. In our case, this does not apply. In fact all chains of transmitters agree on the phrase of '*Descendants of Isaac*'. Then which is the more preferred narration? Who are the hadith narrators? Who did they disagree with from among the narrators used in *Sahih Muslim*? These questions are unanswerable because the chains of narrators rely on one single chain only. Some hadith scholars mistakenly understood that the disagreement can be inferred from hadiths about the topic which means that those conquering Constantinople must be Arabs. Refuting this claim will be dealt with later and those narrations can be referred to the Great Battle that will occur before the conquest of Constantinople.

Second View: The hadith deals with the situation of conquering the City of Constantinople. The hadith of Abu Hurayrah states the phrase is "*The Descendants of Isaac*" and that the conquest will occur while the army will be saying "Allah is the Greatest" and "Allah is Exalted." What seems to support the statement that the army conquering Constantinople is from the descendants of Isaac is that the Roman army will then be one thousand thousands, some of whom will be killed while some other will embrace Islam. Those who embrace Islam will be in the Muslim army that will conquer Constantinople" [17]. This hadith indicates that "the Romans will become Muslims towards the end of time as in Abu Hurayrah's narration concerning the fight of the Romans, which states that the Romans will then say to the Muslims: Let us fight with those who were captivated from us. The Muslims would reply: "No. We swear by God that we will never leave our brothers. So, the Romans request the Muslims to allow them to fight those Roman Muslims and

the Muslims would refuse explaining to the Romans that the Romans Muslim have become their brothers and cannot be handed over. It is not surprising then that most of the army would be captives" [18]. Al-Nawawi said: "This exists in our time; most of the Muslim soldiers [in the region] of Al-Sham (Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon and Egypt today), have been captured and then they captivate the infidels many times. In each time, they captivate thousands of infidels" [18].

First: The claim that hadith narrations mention the conquering army from Medina as a proof that the army is from an Arab descent '*Descendants of Ishmael*' can be refuted as follows: The first army batch that will fight in *The Greatest Battle* will be from Medina and will be joined by a group of Muslims from all parts of the world. Among them will be a large number, seventy thousands of the Romans who embrace Islam and who will fight with Muslims in *The Greatest Battle*. From all of the army, seventy thousands of the descendants of Isaac will be chosen to conquer the city of Constantinople.

Second: The number of soldiers can be more than seventy thousands who represent third of the remaining Muslim army after *The Greatest Battle*. In this army, the Roman Muslims will be seventy thousands. According to the narration, seventy thousands of only the descendants of Isaac will conquer the city. In Sahih Muslim however, the text writes: "the Last Hour will not exist until it (the city) is conquered by seventy thousands of the descendants of Isaac" [1].

Third: It is true the majority of the army will be among the descendants of Isaac, but this will also involve other ethnicities. The number may not be nominally meant for itself. The descendants of Isaac were mentioned to indicate the aspect of majority, a common Arabic linguistic style. God says: "The Angels fell down prostrate, every one, Saving *Iblis*, he was scornful and became one of the disbelievers" [14, 19]. *Iblis* was not among the Angels, yet God mentions him as one of them, "Although he was not in their physical creation, he assimilated them and imitated their deeds and that is why he was addressed as one of them in the speech to the Angels" [20].

According to this argument, the reference to Ibn Kathir's statement: "In some narrations the phrase '*the descendants of Ishmael*' exists. This was supported by 'Iyad and others'" [21]. In this statement, Ibn Kathir depended on the 'Iyad in his explanation of *Sahih*

Muslim. In his *Masanid*, Ibn Kathir did not mention any narration of that very hadith. It is possible that if he were aware of any hadith narrations other than that of the famous hadith in Muslim, he would have given it due attention. Ibn Kathir's phrase 'and others' is quoted from 'Iyad who in turn reported it from others. 'Iyad states: "The phrase 'the descendants of Ishmael' is what is memorized and known" [21]. Their argument is that the phrase 'the descendants of Ishmael' exists in the *Summarized Version of Muslim* of al-Mundhiri which can be refuted as follows: a- All copies of the al-Mundhiri's *Summary of Muslim* failed to agree on that particular phrase. This phrase is found only in the copy of the Institute of Manuscripts written in 673H [22]. The edition verified by al-Albani however, agrees with Muslim's on the phrase 'Descendants of Isaac'. In his critical examination, al-Albani used two different hadith manuscripts: the copy of the *Institute of Photographed Manuscripts* in Rabat Library written in 761H and the copy of the Taymuriyyah Store written in 918H. The copy confirming the phrase of *descendants of Ishmael* happens to be a mistake from the author and is not found in the original copy of the *Summary of Sahih Muslim*. This is because the other copies disagreed with it. b) Supposing that this phrase 'Descendants of Ishmael' is mentioned in the copy of al-Mundhiri (656H), this statement cannot be approved and the attribution to *Sahih Muslim* cannot be supported either because the many reports that transmitted *Sahih Muslim* agreed on the confirmation of the phrase of 'Descendants of Isaac'. All those who verified, explained, summarized or transmitted the hadith from Imam Muslim agreed on that [21, 23, 24]. All those came before the time of Mundhiri. That ensures that what was mentioned in the *Summary of Sahih Muslim* by al-Mundhiri is wrong. The fourth evidence is also false because it deviates from the hadith's literal meaning. The children of a person are his offspring and descendants and cannot be understood to include the children of the brother except with a strong determinant leading us to deviate from the basic meaning of the hadith.

CONCLUSION

The phrase reported in *Sahih Muslim* indicates that the number of those who will conquer Constantinople would be seventy thousands from among the descendants of Isaac. The issue discussed in this paper shows the significance of the science of hadith diversity in clarifying the conflict occurred in the Prophetic hadiths.

Yet, the hadith recorded traditions of the divinely inspired actions of Muhammad. The contradiction shows that there was a real need to examine this issue which successfully resolved in this study.

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