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0521541115 - God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam

Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds

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[More information](#)

1

Introduction

What was the nature of the early caliphate? Islamicists generally believe it to have been a purely political institution. According to Nallino, no caliph ever enjoyed religious authority;¹ according to other Islamicists, some caliphs did lay claim to such authority, but only by way of secondary development and only with limited success². In what follows we shall challenge this belief. It is of course true that religious authority was the prerogative of scholars rather than of caliphs in classical Islam, but we shall argue that this is not how things began. The early caliphate was conceived along lines very different from the classical institution, all religious and political authority being concentrated in it; it was the caliph who was charged with the definition of Islamic law, the very core of the religion, and without allegiance to a caliph no Muslim could achieve salvation. In short, we shall argue that the early caliphate was conceived along the lines familiar from Shī'ite Islam.

The conventional Islamicist view of the caliphate is that enshrined in the bulk of our sources. Practically all the literature informs us that though the Prophet was God's representative on earth in both political and religious matters, there ceased to be a single representative in religious matters on the Prophet's death. Political power passed to the new head of state, the caliph; but religious authority remained with the Prophet himself or, differently put, it passed to

1 C. A. Nallino, 'Appunti sulla natura del "Califatto" in genere e sul presunto "Califatto ottomano"', in his *Raccolta di scritti editi e inediti*, vol. III, Rome 1941; compare also T. W. Arnold, *The Caliphate*², London 1965, p. 14.

2 Thus T. Nagel, *Rechtleitung und Kalifat*, Bonn 1975; D. Sourdél, 'L'autorité califienne dans le monde sunnite' in G. Makdisi, D. Sourdél and J. Sourdél-Thomine (eds.), *La notion d'autorité au moyen âge: Islam, Byzance, Occident*, Paris 1982, pp. 105f; G. Rotter, *Die Umayyaden und der zweite Bürgerkrieg (680–692)*, Wiesbaden 1982, pp. 34, 52, 248ff.

Cambridge University Press

0521541115 - *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam*

Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 *God's Caliph*

those men who remembered what he had said. These men, the Companions, transmitted their recollection of his words and deeds to the next generation, who passed it on to the next, and so forth, and whoever learnt what the Prophet had said and done acquired religious authority thereby. In short, while political power continued to be concentrated in one man, religious authority was now dispersed among those people who, owing their authority entirely to their learning, came to be known as simply the *'ulamā'*, the scholars. As it happened, however, the first three caliphs (Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān) were themselves Companions, so that in practice religious and political authority continued to be united, if no longer concentrated, in the head of state, and during this period the caliphs could and did issue authoritative rulings on law. But though the fourth caliph ('Alī) was also a Companion and moreover a kinsman of the Prophet, he failed to be generally accepted, and on his death the caliphate passed to men who had converted late and unwillingly (the Umayyads), so that the happy union of religion and politics now came to an end. Caliphs and *'ulamā'* went their separate ways, to be briefly reunited only under the pious 'Umar II.

Most Shī'ites disagree with this view. According to the Imāmīs and related-sects, the legitimate head of state ('Alī) inherited not only the political, but also the religious authority of the Prophet. In practice, of course, the legitimate head of state after 'Alī was deprived of his political power by his Sunnī rivals, so that he could only function as a purely religious leader of his Shī'ite following; but in principle he was both head of state and ultimate authority on questions of law and doctrine in Islam.

Modern Islamicists however generally regard the Shī'ites as deviant. Some take them to have started off as adherents of a political leader who was not, at first, very different from that of their opponents, but who was gradually transformed into a religious figurehead.³ Others believe them to have elevated their leader into a religious figurehead from the start, but to have done so under the influence of foreign ideas, their model being the supposedly charismatic leadership of pre-Islamic south Arabia.⁴ Either way, it is the Shī'ites, not the Sunnīs, who are seen as having diverged from the common pattern.

It certainly makes sense to assume that Sunnīs and Shī'ites started

³ Thus for example B. Lewis, *The Arabs in History*⁴, London 1966, p. 71.

⁴ Thus W. M. Watt, *Islam and the Integration of Society*, London 1961, pp. 105f.; repeated by Watt in numerous other publications; accepted by Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, pp. 45f.

Cambridge University Press

0521541115 - God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam

Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction 3

with a common conception of the caliphal office; and given that we owe practically all our sources to those who were in due course to become the Sunnī majority, it is not surprising that we automatically assume this conception to have been of the Sunnī rather than the Shī'ite type. There is, however, much evidence to suggest that this is a mistake.

Cambridge University Press

0521541115 - God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam

Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

The title *khalīfat Allāh*

We take as our starting point the well known fact that the Umayyads made use of the title *khalīfat Allāh*,¹ an expression which we along with many others understand to mean 'deputy of God'.

This translation is scarcely in need of much defence. A *khalīfa* is somebody who stands in the place of another, that is a deputy or a successor depending on whether the other is absent or dead; since the Muslims assumed God to be alive, *khalīfat Allāh* cannot mean 'God's successor'. However, in order to accommodate the conventional view that the caliphate is succession to Muḥammad rather than deputyship on behalf of God, Goldziher construed it as meaning 'successor (of the prophet approved) by God',² and this interpretation has found favour with some. It might now be defended with reference to Paret's conclusion that Qur'ānically *khalīfa* means successor.³ Two Qur'ānic verses were customarily invoked by those who called themselves *khalīfat Allāh*, that is 2:28, in which God announces that 'I am placing a *khalīfa* on earth' with reference to Adam, and 38:25,

1 Cf. I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, London 1967–71, vol. II, p. 61 of the original pagination; *id.*, 'Du sens propre des expressions Ombre de Dieu, Khalife de Dieu pour désigner les chefs dans l'Islam', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 35 (1897); D. S. Margoliouth, 'The Sense of the Title *Khalīfah*' in *A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to E. G. Browne*, Cambridge 1922; E. Tyan, *Institutions du droit public musulman*, vol. I (*Le califat*), Paris 1954, pp. 202, 439ff; H. Ringgren, 'Some Religious Aspects of the Caliphate', *Studies in the History of Religions* (supplements to *Numen*), IV: *The sacral kingship, la regalità sacra*, Leiden 1959; W. M. Watt, 'God's Caliph: Qur'ānic Interpretations and Umayyad Claims' in *Iran and Islam*, ed. C. E. Bosworth, Edinburgh 1971; R. Paret, 'Ḥalīfat Allāh – Vicarius Dei: ein differenzierender Vergleich' in *Mélanges d'Islamologie (Festschrift A. Abel)*, Leiden 1974. It is with some surprise that one notes Hitti's claim that 'such extravagant titles as *khalīfat Allāh* . . . were evidently first bestowed on al-Mutawakkil' (P. K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*⁷, London 1961, p. 317).

2 Goldziher, 'Du sens propre', p. 337.

3 R. Paret, 'Signification coranique de *Ḥalīfa* et d'autres dérivés de la racine *Ḥalafa*', *Studia Islamica* 31 (1970).

Cambridge University Press

0521541115 - God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam
Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The title Khalīfat Allāh* 5

in which He tells David that 'we have made you a *khalīfa* on earth';⁴ if Paret is right that *khalīfa* invariably means successor in the Qur'ān, and if the title *khalīfat Allāh* was actually coined with reference to these verses, then the title ought indeed to mean 'God's successor' in the sense of 'successor appointed by Him' as Goldziher suggested. But plainly it did not. Leaving aside the fact that there were exegetes who disagreed with Paret⁵ and that the provenance of the title is unknown, the texts leave no doubt that *khalīfat Allāh* as applied to the head of state was understood to mean 'deputy of God'. As Watt notes, there are passages in both poetry and prose which militate against Goldziher's interpretation;⁶ paraphrastic titles such as *amīn Allāh*, 'trustee of God', *rā'ī Allāh*, 'shepherd of God', *sulṭān Allāh*, 'the authority of God' or *nā'ib Allāh*, 'lieutenant of God' also make it unlikely that *khalīfat Allāh* meant anything but 'deputy of God';⁷ and so does the general tenor of the sources, as will be seen. Moreover, since 'Uthmān, the first caliph for whom the title *khalīfat Allāh* is securely attested, was also known as *amīn Allāh*, there is no reason to assume that *khalīfat Allāh* only acquired its exalted meaning in the course of its evolution;⁸ we may take it that it meant 'deputy of God' from the start.

Now 'deputy of God' is a title which implies a strong claim to religious authority. This is why we are interested in it, and we wish to begin by establishing three basic points. First, it is attested not

4 If *khalīfa* means successor here, Adam was a successor to angels or *jinn* and David to some previous king.

5 Cf. Watt, 'God's Caliph', p. 566, where some exegetical views are cited. Al-Bayḏāwī also accepts that *khalīfa* means deputy, adding that every prophet was a deputy of God (*Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-ta'wīl*, Istanbul n.d., vol. 1, p. 64, ad 2:28), and the same interpretation is implied in the stories in which 'Umar I and 'Umar II reject the title of *khalīfat Allāh* on the ground that it refers exclusively to prophets such as David (cf. below, note 86). According to Watt, the exegetes exercised great ingenuity to avoid the interpretation of *khalīfa* as 'deputy' for political reasons, opting for far-fetched interpretations such as that of 'posterity' or 'successor' instead (W. M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, Edinburgh 1973, p. 84; the far-fetched interpretation is that adopted by Paret). But what bothered an exegete such as al-Ṭabarī was clearly not politics, but rather the incompatibility of 2:28 with the doctrine of prophetic *īsmā*: how could a deputy of God, viz. a prophet, be said to 'act corruptly and shed blood'? (cf. *id.*, 'God's Caliph', p. 566).

6 Watt, 'God's Caliph', p. 571; *id.*, *Formative Period*, p. 84. In what follows we shall translate *khalīfat Allāh* as 'deputy of God' or leave the expression untranslated; the reader may judge for himself how many times 'successor of the Prophet approved by God' would be a felicitous rendition.

7 Cf. the index.

8 Cf. Watt, *Formative Period*, p. 84, where this possibility is left open. For 'Uthmān as *amīn Allāh* see below, note 85.

Cambridge University Press

0521541115 - God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam
Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *God's Caliph*

just for some Umayyad caliphs, but for all of them, or more precisely for all of those who lived to rule for more than a year; secondly, it was an official designation of the Umayyad head of state, not just a term of flattery; and thirdly, it was well known to be what the title of *khalīfa* stood for when used on its own.

1 Attestations per caliph

Note: In order not to clutter the text we give only short references here; full bibliographical details are given in the list of works cited. We should like to acknowledge our debt to Tyan, whose *Califat* provided us with many of our attestations.

(1) *Uthmān*

- (a) 'I am the servant of God and His deputy' (*Aghānī*, vol. xvi, p. 326; *Iqd.*, vol. iv, p. 301⁹).
- (b) 'I beseech you by God and remind you of His right and the right of His *khalīfa*' (*Aghānī*, vol. xvi, p. 325).
- (c) 'Perhaps you will see the *khalīfa* of God among you as he was, one day in a place of joy' (Ḥassān b. Thābit, no. 20:10; cf. 'Arafat, 'Background', pp. 276ff.).
- (d) 'The deputy of God, he gave them and granted them what there was of gold, vessels and silver' (Laylā al-Akhyaliyya, no. 27:2).
- (e) 'They were brought something which cancels the duty to avenge a deputy of God's (*khalīfat*ⁱⁿ *li'llāh*, Naṣr b. Muzāḥim, *Waq'at Ṣiffīn*, p. 229).

(2) *Mu'āwiya*

- (a) 'The earth belongs to God and I am the deputy of God' (Bal., *Ans.*, vol. iv/a, p. 17 = vol. iv/1, p. 20, §63; Mas., *Murūj*, vol. iii, §1861 = v, pp. 104f).
- (b) 'Your brother, Ibn Ḥarb, is the deputy of God and you are his vizier' (Ḥāritha b. Badr to Ziyād b. Abīhi in Tab., ser. ii, p. 78).
- (c) 'You have lost the *khalīfat Allāh* and been given the *khilāfat Allāh*' ('Aṭā' or 'Āṣim b. Abī Ṣayfī to Yazīd I on Mu'āwiya's death in Jāhīz, *Bayān*, vol. ii, p. 191; Mas., *Murūj*, vol. iii, §1912 = v, p. 152; *Iqd.*, vol. iii, p. 309¹⁹).
- (d) 'Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān was a servant whom God deputed

Cambridge University Press

0521541115 - God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam

Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The title Khalīfat Allāh* 7

(*istakhlafahu Allāh*) over the servants...and God...has now invested us with what he had' (Yazīd I in Ibn Qutayba, *Imāma*, p. 190).

- (e) Mu'āwiya preferred his son Yazīd for *khalīfat Allāh 'alā 'ibādihī* (al-Mu'taḍid in Ibn Abī 'l-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ*, vol. xv, p. 178, citing Ṭabarī; but Tab., ser. iii, p. 2173¹², gives a different version).

(3) *Yazīd I*

- (a) Cf. above, 2, c,d,e.
 (b) *Imām al-muslimīn wa-khalīfat rabb al-'ālamīn* (Muslim b. 'Uqba in Ibn Qutayba, *Imāma*, p. 203, cf. p. 202: 'I hope that God, exalted and mighty is He, will inspire His *khalīfa* and 'abd with knowledge of what should be done').
 (c) 'Woe to you who have separated from the *sunna* and *jamā'a* and who have disobeyed the deputy of God' (Syrians to Hāshimites in Ḥamza al-Ḥafḥānī, p. 217).

(5) *The Sufyānids in general*

- (a) 'O people of Jordan, you know that Ibn al-Zubayr is in a state of dissension, hypocrisy and disobedience against the caliphs of God' (Ḥassān b. Mālīk b. Baḥdal in *Iqd*, vol. iv, p. 395⁹).
 (b) The Umayyads in the presence of Mu'āwiya are addressed as *banī khulafā' Allāh* (*Aghānī*, vol. xx, p. 212; al-Tilbānī, 'Miskīn al-Dārimī', p. 185).

(5) *Marwān I*

No direct attestation.

(6) *'Abd al-Malik*

- (a) For the coinage of 'Abd al-Malik's reign which refers to *khalīfat Allāh*, see Walker, *Catalogue*, vol. ii, pp. 28, 30f (bronze coins, undated (but see below, chapter 3, note 1)); vol. i, p. 24; Miles, 'Miḥrāb and 'Anazah', p. 171; and *id.*, 'Some Arab-Sasanian and Related Coins', p. 192 (*miḥrāb* and 'anaza dirhams, undated); Walker, *Catalogue*, vol. i, p. 25 and Salmān, 'Dirham nādir', pp. 163ff. (Khusraw II plus standing caliph dirham, dated 75).

Cambridge University Press

0521541115 - God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam
Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *God's Caliph*

- (b) For the stories in which al-Ḥajjāj deems God's *khalīfa* superior to His *rasūl* with reference to 'Abd al-Malik, see below, chapter 3, pp. 28f.
- (c) 'To the servant of God, the Commander of the Faithful and *khalīfat rabb al-'ālamīn*' (letter from al-Ḥajjāj to 'Abd al-Malik in *Iqd*, vol. v, p. 2512).
- (d) 'God, exalted is He, has said, "fear God as much as you can" (64:16). This is [due] to God. . . Then He said, "hear and obey"' (also 64:16). This [obedience is due] to the servant of God, the *khalīfa* of God and the noble one/beloved (*najīb/ḥabīb*) of God, 'Abd al-Malik' (speech by al-Ḥajjāj in Mas., *Murūj*, vol. iii, §2088 = v, p. 330; *Iqd*, vol. iv, p. 117; cf. Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, vol. ii, p. 514, and the mangled version in Ibn 'Asākir, *Tahdhīb*, vol. iv, p. 72, in which the caliphal epithets are reduced to *amīr al-mu'minīn*).
- (e) 'You thought that God would betray His religion and His *khalīfa*' (al-Ḥajjāj after Dayr al-Jamājim in *Iqd*, vol. iv, p. 116⁶; Mas., *Murūj*, vol. iii, §2066 = vol. v, p. 305).
- (f) 'God, mighty and exalted is He, has deputed the Commander of the Faithful 'Abd al-Malik over His lands (*istakhlafahu Allāh*) and been satisfied with him as imam over His servants' (speech by al-Ḥajjāj in Ibn Qutayba, *Imāma*, p. 233).
- (g) 'The earth belongs to God who has appointed His *khalīfa* to it' (Farazdaq, vol. i, p. 25⁵).
- (h) 'Ibn Marwān is on your hump, the *khalīfa* of God who has mounted you' (camel-driver's song in *Aghānī*, vol. xvi, p. 183; a variant version refers to al-Walīd I, cf. below).
- (i) 'God has garlanded you with *khalīfa* and *hudā*' (Jarīr, p. 474³).
- (j) 'The caliph of God through whom rain is sought' (al-Akḥṭal, *Dīwān*, p. 101³; also cited in *Aghānī*, vol. xi, p. 66).
- (k) *Khalīfāt Allāh al-murajjā* (al-'Abbās b. Muḥammad in *Aghānī*, vol. xxiv, p. 217, probably with reference to 'Abd al-Malik).
- (l) 'The deputy of God on his *minbar*' (Ibn Qays al-Ruqayyāt, no. 1:17 (p. 70)).
- (m) *Khalīfat al-Rahmān* (Rā'ī, pp. 228⁴¹, 229⁴⁷, variants; the text has *walī amr Allāh*).

(7) *al-Walīd I*

- (a) For the stories in which Khālid al-Qasrī deems God's *khalīfa* superior to His *rasūl* with reference to al-Walīd I, see below, chapter 3, p. 29.

Cambridge University Press

0521541115 - God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam
Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The title Khalīfat Allāh* 9

- (b) *Fa-anta li-rabb al-ālamīn khalīfa* (Jarīr, p. 384⁸).
- (c) 'You are the shepherd of God on earth' (Farazdaq, vol. i, p. 312¹).
- (d) 'The caliph of God through whom clouds of rain are sought' (Nābighat B. Shaybān, p. 28⁴).
- (e) 'The *khalīfa* of God through whose *sunna* rain is sought' (Akḥṭal, p. 185⁶).
- (f) 'The *khalīfa* of God who has mounted you' (Al-Walīd to his camel in *Iqd*, vol. iv, p. 424, a variant of 6 (h); cf. Ibn 'Asākir, *Tahdhīb*, vol. iii, p. 398, where it is Jamīl who says it of al-Walīd I).

(8) *Sulaymān*

- (a) 'The *khalīfa* of God through whom rain is sought' (Farazdaq, vol. i, p. 361⁶. Note also Jarīr, p. 35³, where Ayyūb, the son of Sulaymān is prematurely described as *khalīfa li'l-Rahmān*).
- (b) 'My heir apparent among you and my successor among all of those over whom God has deputed me (*istakhlafanī Allāh*) is . . . 'Umar' (Sulaymān's testament in Ibn Qutayba, *Imāma*, p. 308; in this document Sulaymān styles himself *khalīfat al-muslimīn*, cf. p. 307).

(9) *Umar II*

- (a) 'The *khalīfa* of God, and God will preserve him' (Jarīr, p. 274⁸; the title is mentioned again at p. 275⁶).
- (b) 'The one who sent the Prophet has placed the *khilāfa* in the just imam' (Jarīr, p. 415⁹).

(10) *Yazīd II*

- (a) 'Yazīd b. 'Abd al-Malik is the deputy of God; God had deputed him over His servants . . . and he was appointed me to what you see' (Ibn Hubayra in Mas., *Murūj*, vol. iv, §2210 = v, p. 458; Ibn Khallikān, vol. ii, p. 71).
- (b) *Khalīfat Allāh* (Jarīr, p. 256⁶).

(11) *Hishām*

- (a) For stories in which the deputy and the messenger of God are compared with reference to Hishām, see below, chapter 3, p. 29.

Cambridge University Press

0521541115 - God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam

Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *God's Caliph*

- (b) 'and Hishām, the deputy of God' (al-'Abalī in *Aghānī*, vol. xi, p. 305).
- (c) 'You are using abusive words for all that you are God's deputy on earth' (visitor to Hishām in Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, vol. ix, p. 351).
- (d) 'You have lied to *khalīfat al-Raḥmān* concerning it' (al-Farazdaq or al-Mufarrigh b. al-Muraqqa' in *Aghānī*, vol. xxii, p. 21).
- (e) *al-imām khalīfat Allāh al-riḍā 'l-humām* (Ḥafṣ al-Umawī in Ibn 'Asākir, *Tahdhīb*, vol. iv, p. 392).
- (f) Note also *khalīfat ahl al-ard*, *khalīfat al-anām* (Farazdaq, vol. i, p. 165⁷, vol. ii, p. 830¹⁵); compare Sulaymān's *khalīfat al-muslimīn* (above, 8,b).

(12) *al-Walīd II*

- (a) Cf. the letter translated below, appendix 2, pp. 116ff., in which the caliphal institution is identified as deputyship on behalf of God and the caliphs are referred to as *khulafā' Allāh*.

(13) *Yazīd III*

- (a) Cf. the letter translated below, appendix 2, pp. 126ff., in which Yazīd III identifies all Umayyad caliphs up to and including Hishām as *khulafā' Allāh*; by implication he brackets himself with them.

(14) *Marwān II*

- (a) Cf. the letter in which Marwān (not yet caliph) states that 'this caliphate is from God' (Tab., ser. ii, p. 1850).
- (b) 'God's religion and His *khilāfa*' (Marwān in a letter (penned by 'Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Yaḥyā) in Ṣafwat, *Rasā'il*, vol. ii, p. 474, citing Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Ikhtiyār al-manzūm wa'l-manthūr* and other sources).
- (c) 'And in disobedience to the deputy of God a Muslim continually strikes with the sword in his hand that of his brother' ('Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Yaḥyā with reference, probably, to Marwān II, in his 'Risāla fī'l-fitna' in *al-Tadhkhira al-ḥamdūniyya*, bāb 31). Cf. below, chapter 3, note 14, where 'Abd al-Ḥamīd speaks of God's *rasūl* and *khalīfa*.