

Book Reviews

The ‘Alids: The First Family of Islam, 750-1200

Teresa Bernheimer

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How did the descendants of the Prophet, known as the ‘Alids, become the “one indisputable nobility in Islam” (p. 1)? What did they do to attain and extend their influence? Is ‘Alid-ness only for men? And, how did their status influence the Jews? Teresa Bernheimer answers these questions, and more, in this first detailed study on their sociopolitical history in early Islam.

This study is distinguished by a cross-sectarian and holistic approach, in that the author examines the ‘Alids independent of whether they were Sunni or Shi’i, rich or poor, or rebellious or quietist. While the study focuses on ‘Alids from the Abbasid to the Saljuq eras, as well as those in the eastern part of the Islamic empire, she presents her conclusions in the light of this social phenomenon throughout the Islamic world, both past and present. In doing so, Bernheimer highlights how members of this group saw themselves and were seen by others as a single body that transcended sectarian or cultural boundaries.

After introducing the main question – how the ‘Alids attained and extended their influence – the author explores it from four angles, each in a separate chapter. She begins with chapter 2, “Genealogy, Money, and the Drawing of Boundaries.” Here, she argues that ‘Alid genealogies do not merely continue the pre-Islamic Arab genealogical tradition. Instead, while those genealogies looked to the past, ‘Alid genealogies focused on the present – namely, the need to determine inclusion in and exclusion from the group because of “tangible and intangible” benefits, such as gifts (p. 31), as recorded in an illustrative account of a wealthy but stranded ‘Alid hajji. In that regard, she sees ‘Alid genealogies as being more akin to the *dīwān* instituted by Umar ibn al-Khattab (which Tabari felt had origins in Byzantine custom) in that both practices assigned social rank along with financial benefits based on tribe.

Chapter 2 also addresses the topic of false claimants. Bernheimer does not attempt to sift out false ‘Alids on the grounds that “[w]hat matters is that [...] the sayyids themselves as well as the rest of society believed that they were

the descendants of the Prophet and acted accordingly” (p. 12). (This is in contrast to some of the more literal approaches to studying ‘Alid descent today, such as DNA testing.) However, she does mention medieval approaches to weeding out false claimants, as well as strategies used by the unscrupulous to forge a false ‘Alid genealogy. Exile and even branding could be meted out as punishment to fraudulent ‘Alids, although she holds that “it was deemed better to let one fraudster slip through the net than to offend a true sayyid” (p. 31). While she does not directly draw the link in her discussion, the strategies she describes are strongly reminiscent of the contemporaneous means used to try to ensure a hadith’s validity through its narrators, as well as the means used to forge chains of narration, and which emerged in similar social context.

Chapter 3, on ‘Alid marriage patterns, opens with a contemporary account of a scandal that ensued after a Hadrami *sayyidah* in Southeast Asia married a non-‘Alid man and how that, in turn, led some people to “question openly the centuries-long domination of the sayyids [...] setting in motion events that arguably led to the Yemeni revolution” (p. 62). This event indicates the issues’ continued relevance in some parts of the contemporary Islamic world. After analyzing their marriage patterns in the early Islamic empire, she concludes that (1) their largely endogamous marriage patterns bolstered a distinct family identity. Otherwise, marrying out would “commonise” ‘Alid women and “compromise the family’s special status, on which claims to privileges and social exceptionalism were based” (p. 50); (2) keeping these women within the family communicated a sense of elitism, because “one only gives one’s daughters in marriage to one’s equals or superiors” (p. 35) and (3) ‘Alid men sometimes married outside the family, generally to women of noble birth (Arab or otherwise), to bring more resources into the family, as well as (for the politically active type) to increase their support base.

In addition to historical analysis, Bernheimer briefly surveys the scholarly attitudes toward compatibility in social status (*kafā’ah*) between marriage partners among the four Sunni schools. She observes that while one would expect a greater emphasis on ‘Alid lineage among the Shi‘ah, their scholars – unlike many Sunni scholars – did not treat social rank or lineage as a criterion for the acceptability of a spouse. She cites a prominent early Twelver Shi‘i scholar, al-Sharif al-Murtada (d. 436/1044) as saying that it is religiously acceptable for an ‘Alid woman to marry a non-‘Alid man. Building on this, she argues that among early Shi‘ah, loyalty to the Imam (*wilāyah*) outweighed lineage. Her discussion remains relevant today, given the cultural expectation among some Shi‘ah that an ‘Alid woman can only marry an ‘Alid man, and the occasional attempts to justify this opinion through religious sources.

Another topic of contemporary interest is matrilineal descent. While, generally speaking, ‘Alid descent was seen as passing through the male line, the fact remains that the ‘Alids’ link to the Prophet is through his daughter Fatimah, not a male heir. Bernheimer observes that while early ‘Alid genealogies are relatively plentiful in their discussions of women, female ‘Alids suddenly disappear during the Abbasid era. In addition to suggesting pragmatic reasons for this, she suggests Asad Ahmed’s hypothesis that “[u]ntil the early ‘Abbāsīd period matrilineality still counted for much, not just in practical sociopolitics [...] but also as an abstract principle of legitimacy and authority” (p. 37). Building on that, she suggests that the Abbasids may have intentionally downplayed matrilineal descent as a way to strengthen their genealogical claim to the Prophet by diminishing the claim of the ‘Alids, whom they saw as competitors. Of course, the disappearance of women could also simply be one result of the heavily patriarchal culture in the center of the Abbasid Empire. Bernheimer also introduces the topic of “multi-marrying women,” which ties into the contemporary interest in marriage and divorce patterns in early Islamic history, as well as the general finding that divorce was less stigmatized for women in the early Islamic era than it is in some regions of the Islamic world today.

The next chapter addresses the leadership of the family (*niqābah*). The author takes the existence of a specially recognized leadership position as a sign of the family’s increased status, as well as a response to the ‘Alid diaspora. In this chapter, she offers answers to questions that she feels have not yet been fully researched, such as the extent of the *naqīb*’s power, his autonomy from the authorities, and his duties toward the ‘Alids. She also gives an account of a female *naqībah*.

This is followed by a chapter on the ‘Alids’ emergence as local nobility, with a special emphasis on Nishapur. Bernheimer observes the seeming paradox that while the ‘Alids generally did not assume formal positions of authority as politicians or scholars, they nonetheless wielded local authority and their presence was considered part of a locale’s *faḍā’il* (merits) (p. 72). Citing Patricia Crone, she also holds that the power accorded to local ‘Alid notables was a sign of the central government’s diminishing influence.

After wrapping up the main four sections, the last couple of pages address the question mentioned in the beginning, namely, how the ‘Alid phenomenon affected Jews living in Muslim lands. Bernheimer observes that Jews in the tenth- and eleventh-century Middle East began adopting similar strategies to determine who was and was not descended from King David, and awarded them similar social privileges. Lineage and descent from King David “did not

automatically entitle one to a position of authority; but it could help to support claims to political and religious power” (p. 89). This observation is noteworthy both in and of itself, as well as in the broader context of studies on the two religions’ influence upon each other in the medieval Islamic world. It also offers the reader the opportunity to consider the ‘Alid phenomenon as a human, or at least a Semitic, one as opposed to a purely Islamic one.

Overall, the study is meticulous and well-referenced, with ample support from primary sources in addition to active engagement with contemporary literature. Although a historical study, many concerns discussed are clearly still of current importance, and ‘Alid family trees remain in circulation today. Bernheimer calls attention to the contemporary link throughout, noting the continued cross-cultural and cross-sectarian influence exerted by contemporary ‘Alids, ranging from the kings of Morocco to the Aga Khan. The only real question hovering throughout the book is how the Prophet, given his egalitarian ethos and emphasis on religious brotherhood and sisterhood, would have felt about his descendants becoming a “blood aristocracy without peer” (p. 1) or a “First Family,” in the idiomatic sense of according social prestige and visibility to the relatives of notables. Of course, since this is a book on history one would not expect an answer here. That larger concern aside, this book should prove valuable to anyone wishing to study the social phenomenon of the ‘Alids or medieval Islamic history in general.

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