

A History of Shi‘i Islam

Farhad Daftary

*London and New York: I.B. Tauris, in association with
The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2013. 315 pages.*

Despite the progress made in the study of Shi‘i Islam, few publications provide a comprehensive account of its history. Referring primarily to secondary sources, *A History of Shi‘i Islam* overviews key events going back to the time of Prophet Muhammad to “clarify misunderstandings” and illustrate the various Shi‘i schools’ contribution to Islamic history. *From an Ismaili Perspective* could have been a helpful subtitle, as will be explained below.

The book consists of six chapters: “Introduction: Progress in the Study of Shi‘i Islam,” “The Origins and Early History of Shi‘i Islam,” “The Ithna‘asharis or Twelvers,” “The Ismailis,” “The Zaydis,” and “The Nusayris or ‘Alawis,”

respectively. A glossary is provided; however, not all of the terms used by the author are listed. Each chapter is divided into several subsections.

Chapter 1 explores how medieval Sunni scholars influenced the perception of Islam as “a monolithic phenomenon with a well-defined doctrinal basis from which different groups then deviated over time” (p. 4), how the Abbasids launched an anti-Isma'ili campaign by fabricating evidence, how European travellers and Orientalists knew little about Shi'i Islam until very late, and why Ismailism became the main object of attention during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It concludes with a brief overview of modern scholarship, in which some of the well-known names in Islamic and Twelver Shi'i (e.g., Ignaz Goldziher [d. 1921], Etan Kohlberg, Henry Corbin [d. 1978]) and Isma'ili Shi'i studies (e.g., Wilferd Madelung and Abbas Hamdani) are listed. The Institute of Isma'ili Studies is mentioned as sponsoring research into Shi'i Islam under the patronage of the forty-ninth Nizari Imam. There is also an outline of recent developments in Zaydi and Nusayri studies.

Chapter 2 discusses the origins of Shi'ism, the early Shi'ah and the Kay-saniyyah, the *ghulāt* (“extremists”) and the early Imamiyyah, and then examines the Imami Shi'i doctrine of Imamate. After reading this chapter, one may ask what it offers that similar works do not, since it consists of a somewhat brief discussion on a complex and crucial period that irrevocably shaped the landscape of Shi'i Islam. Other works have examined this period in greater detail and accuracy. It also seems that Daftary, perhaps aiming for impartiality, has accepted certain long-held Sunni views as given.

For example, without explaining the Shi'i view of why Prophet Muhammad selected Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor and the subsequent coup organized at the Saqifah, he portrays the dispute between the first three caliphs and the Ahl al-Bayt as being about land, taxes, and the Bani Hashim's “deprivation of spiritual power.” The latter were, according to him, disgruntled at the loss of their “privileged status” (p. 27). It is well known that this particular matter was not about the Bani Hashim in general, but about specific members. Moreover, the author does not touch upon the dispute's theological implications at all. For example, the confiscation of Fadak – a pivotal event for the Shi'ah – encapsulates the violation of a divinely bestowed order by a politician bent on sidelining the family of his alleged companion (viz., the Prophet). The Sunnis, on the other hand, have portrayed it as a mere argument over inheritance.

Significant details are also excluded concerning Hasan ibn Ali's treaty with Mu'awiyah. In spite of the historical evidence that the latter reneged

on the treaty's terms, the author holds that this "allowed for the safety of life and property for the *shi'at 'Ali*" (p. 32). Again, following the Sunni interpretation of history, the author alleges that the Shi'ah chose the members of the Ahl al-Bayt: "It was after the Abbasid revolution that the Shi'ah came to define the ahl al-bayt more restrictively to include only the Fatimid 'Alids" (p. 36). Daftary presents his particular viewpoint as fact; however, some critical comparison of alternative views would have enriched his discussion further.

Another prominent thesis presented uncritically as fact is that many Twelver Shi'i doctrines, such as the phenomenon of the Hidden Imam who will re-appear at the end of time, originated with the Kaysaniyyah and the "extremists" (p. 38). Daftary defines an "extremist" Shi'i as one who "condemned the first three caliphs before 'Ali as usurpers" (p. 39), but offers no theological or political explanation as to exactly how this constitutes "extremism." This widely held Sunni thesis has been at the crux of a great deal of historical conflict.

Throughout this book, the author uses *moderate* and *extremist* without defining what he means by them. This indicates an assumed shared outlook with the reader, which raises the question of for whom the book is written. Again, he says that "[t]he *ghulāt* were accused by the more moderate Shi'is of exaggeration (*ghulūw*) in religious matters in respect to their [I]mams" (p. 40). Although he does suggest an article for further understanding the definition of *ghulūw*, readers who might be new to the field are largely left in the dark. In addition, since he holds that many Twelver and even Ismaili beliefs originated with "extremists," he does not address how such beliefs appear in narrations traced back to the Imams.

Following what seems to have been a privately made decision about what constitutes extremism, Daftary goes on to categorize the Fifth Imam, al-Baqir, as a "radical" rejected by the "moderate" Zaydis (p. 148), and who, in formulating the case for his Imamate, made "little recourse to earlier authorities" (p. 44). This seemingly benign sentence is actually a categorical refutation of the Shi'i belief that knowledge had been transmitted from one Imam to the next since the time of Prophet Muhammad. Since, according to Daftary, al-Baqir appears to have overlooked the teachings of his father al-Sajjad, it seems that he needed a Companion, Abd Allah ibn al-Abbas, to come up with some of his legal tenets (p. 45). This, in any case, is how the author explains al-Baqir's affirmation of the legality of *mut'ah*, which the Ismailis reject. What he does not point out is that the Ismailis' emphasis on *zāhir* and *bāṭin* (p. 113) mostly likely originated with al-Baqir (see Arzina

Lalani, *Early Shi'i Thought* [London and New York: I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2013]).

Other refutations couched in seemingly benign statements include one made in chapter 3 against the Twelver position that their Imams were poisoned in captivity (pp. 59, 61). Again, Daftary adopts the Sunni position that, for example, the Abbasid caliph Ma'mun (r. 813-33) treated the Eighth Imam "lavishly" and performed an act of kindness by burying him "next to the grave of his own father, Harun al-Rashid," despite Shi'i assertions that Ma'mun poisoned him (p. 61). In other words, in light of such magnanimity the Imami Shi'is must be fabricating again.

Moving on to chapter 4, Daftary notes key Twelvers who converted to Ismailism because of their dissatisfaction with the Imams' policies (pp. 110, 111, 132, 135); oddly enough, he does not mention any Ismailis who became Twelvers. Having implicitly cast doubt on the authenticity of Imami narrations containing such key doctrines as occultation, he nevertheless makes a definitive statement regarding Imam al-Sadiq's selection of his son Ismail as his successor: "There can be no doubt about the authenticity of this designation" (p. 106). On the other hand, narrations claiming that he selected his son Musa al-Kadhim were "produced" by Twelvers (p. 106). In giving an account of the intra-Ismaili conflicts, those who upheld the legitimacy of the Fatimids (the Imams of today's Nizaris) are called "loyalists," while those who broke away are called "dissidents" (p. 112).

Despite these issues relating to criticality, the book contains some interesting factual information about how different Shi'i branches spread across the Muslim world. It usefully demythologises and elaborates upon the "Assassins" of Mount Alamut and gives concise histories of the Zaydis and Nusayris. Some basic accounts of the various groups' doctrines are given in each section. But the fact that this volume is fundamentally not an analysis of Shi'i theologies makes Shi'i history hard to understand, since it starts to appear as simply a series of splits, sub-splits, and infighting over who has the right to be Imam, especially in chapter 5 on the Zaydis. One or two grammatical errors need to be ironed out (e.g., "comprised of" [pp. 27, 105, 113] should be just "comprised" and "a hereditary" should be "an hereditary" [p. 128]).

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