

Early Shi`i Thought: The Teachings of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir

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The work under consideration is a clear and concise exposition of the life and thought of Muhammad al-Baqir, the great-grandson of Prophet Muhammad and one of the most influential Shi`i Imams, recognized by both the Isma`ili and Ithna`ashari Shi`ahs. In this revised version of her doctoral dissertation, the author draws on a wide-range of primary sources and a selection of secondary materials in order to provide the reader with a portrait of a central figure in Shi`i Islam, one who can also tell us a great deal about the formative stage of Islamic thought. For this reason, *Early Shi`i Thought* should be of interest not only to students of Shi`ism, but also to all those concerned with the often complex development of Islamic civilization during its early period.

The first chapter, which serves as the introduction, constitutes a brief summary of the lives of the first Shi`i Imams and the succession to the Prophet. Here, the author provides us with a list of the primary sources that she will be using throughout her study. The second chapter, dealing with the imamate before the time of Muhammad al-Baqir, is also an historical overview of the lives of the early Imams and their struggles against both the Umayyads as well as some of their own partisans. Chapter 3 is devoted to al-Baqir's succession to the imamate and to the divisions among the Shi`ah at that time. Al-Baqir's quietism is contrasted with the political activism of his half-brother Zayd ibn `Ali and the emerging Zaydi Shi`ah, who were willing to revolt against their rulers.

The next four chapters are devoted to analyzing his views on several key theological and juristic issues and represent the main contribution of Lalani's book. As the author herself remarks, Shi`i theology and jurisprudence would both be inconceivable without the contributions of al-Baqir

and his son Ja`far al-Sadiq (p. 106). Al-Baqir's understanding of the imamate and his interpretations of those Qur'anic verses that seem to uphold this central Shi'i doctrine are the subject of the fourth chapter. This chapter also includes an overview of the tradition of Ghadir Khumm, according to which, the Shi'ah argue, the Prophet appointed `Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor. Chapter 5 explains al-Baqir's opinions on some early theological debates, including those regarding the nature of faith and the concept of predestination.

The sixth chapter highlights al-Baqir's role as a transmitter of hadith. We learn that he was viewed positively by those outside of his own circle, namely by the Sunni traditionists and the eponymous founders of the Sunni schools of law. We are also furnished with a valuable report on his followers' geographical distribution. Chapter 7 discusses al-Baqir's contribution to Shi'i jurisprudence by addressing his opinions on the sources of the law, his prescriptions for ritual and the believers' conduct, and his role as a systematizer and founder of Shi'i jurisprudence. The book concludes with a brief epilogue.

As stated above, the author has been quite thorough in her use of primary sources to flesh out her picture of Muhammad al-Baqir's life and teachings. She draws upon the histories of al-Ya`qubi (d. ca 900) and al-Tabari (d. 923), the heresiographies of al-Nawbakhti (d. ca 912-22) and al-Shahrastani (d. 1153), as well as the works of the Ithna`ashari traditionist al-Kulayni (d. 940-41) and the Fatimid jurist al-Qadi al-Nu`man (d. 974), among many others. While this reliance upon primary source material is to be commended, Lalani is not very rigorous in sketching the historical and cultural contexts from which they emerged and does not explain their possible relationship to each other.

With regards to the problem of authenticity, she justifiably favors "a judicious use rather than outright rejection" (p. 19) of the traditions attributed to al-Baqir. Nevertheless, she should have been more explicit about which sources she considered the most authoritative and why, how the authors' confessional and historical backgrounds influenced their depictions of al-Baqir, and how the sources fit together chronologically. Such issues are only mentioned in passing. Given that the author crafts a portrait of al-Baqir from such a diverse and complex array of source materials, each piece of the picture needs to be supported by the proper critical analysis. This, added to the great number of generalizations or vague formulations that she makes regarding many important historical and doctrinal developments, tends to detract from the soundness of her arguments.

Despite these reservations, it is important to stress that the author successfully fulfills her objective of providing an overview of Muhammad al-Baqir's life and thought. Her work leaves us in no doubt of his centrality to Shi'i theology and jurisprudence, as well as his position as a role model for the early Shi'i community. While the author is particularly interested in highlighting al-Baqir's place in the Shi'i tradition, she also emphasizes that he is a figure of no small importance for the general development of Islamic thought in its early period. A study such as Lalani's reminds us that there is much to be learned about the formative period of the Islamic community from so-called marginal or sectarian figures. For this reason, her work is worth reading and should serve as the basis for further informative studies on the topic.

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