
In this book the author, ex-holder of the Sheikh Zayd Chair of Islamic Studies and Head of the Department of Religious Studies, American University of Beirut, has attempted an historical, rather than a theological, exposition of the origins and development of Shi’ite Islam. Bernard Lewis in his *Origins of Ismā‘īlism* (Cambridge 1940), traced the origins of this important and rather influential branch of Shi‘ism while ‘Allāma Sayyid Muhammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā’ī in his *Shī‘ite Islam* (London, New York 1975) devotes only one chapter (Ch. I) to a brief description of the historical factors behind the genesis of the pro-‘Alid movement and its growth which later took the form and shape of what is now known as Shi‘ism. Dr. Jafri has however, admirably steered clear of this ‘dangerous course’ and acquitted himself honourably well. Although dealing with a rather delicate subject he has maintained a very sober and stable balance and has nowhere allowed his sentiments and feelings to sway him to the prejudice of the historical facts. It is indeed extremely difficult to suppress one’s own religious susceptibilities and stick to nothing but the plain historical truth.

The book under review is a scholarly attempt at historically establishing what constitutes the core of Shi‘ite beliefs — the superiority of the Prophet’s household and the claim and right of ‘Alī to succeed the Prophet, to the rule over the community of the believers. “The problem of political succession (to the Prophet of Islam) may be said to be the element that crystallised the Shi‘ites into a distinct group, and political suppression in later periods, especially the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn only accentuated this tendency of the Shi‘ites to see themselves as a separate community within the Islamic World” *(Shī‘ite Islam, S.H. Nasr’s preface, p. 9).*

In the very first chapter entitled the ‘Conceptual Foundations’ the author has dilated on the ancient (Jāhiliyya) belief of the tribal Arab society of ḥasab/šarāf. He has shown from quotations from certain Arab poets as Nābigha al-Dhubyānī and Ḏāmra that the pre-Islamic Arabs were very jealous to guard their ‘asabiyya traditions, particularly what related to their ḥasab and nasab. Dr. Jafri writes: “Ancestral fame of nobility and virtuous deeds must therefore be preserved as the strongest and most continuous incentive to be adopted by the descendants. It was in this sense that the term Sunna had frequently been used long before Islam”. (p. 5). The use of the word Sunna in this context may cause some confusion. Here the word in question has been used merely and purely in its primitive, original, lexical meaning — a way, a habit, a custom, a usage, and not in the technical, juristic sense in which it is now used. In the next sentence the author also recognises this
fact and says that the content of the term *Sunna* was drastically replaced by the Prophetic *Sunna*. In a nut-shell a *sunna* was a ready-made set of mandatory answers to any question of conduct that could possibly arise in the case of a Muslim. The pagan Arab on the other hand, had endeavoured, though to a much smaller extent to follow the *Sunna* of his ancestors in matters such as chivalry, *al-futuwwa*, serving a guest, awarding protection to an out-law, jealousy in love and genealogy etc. Although it is a moot point whether Islam puts a premium on *sharaf* or nobility especially when it lays more stress on piety (*taqwa*) and in view of the sermon delivered by the Prophet on the occasion of the last pilgrimage. Yet it must be openly admitted that the author has very ably made out a case in support of his view-point. He has in this context also very forcefully but soberly rebutted the allegation indulged in by some prejudiced Western scholars what were “the ancestors of Muhammad really as important in dignity, nobility and influence as the sources suggest?" (p. 7). He has also strongly refuted the statement that the importance of the Banū Hāshim has been grossly exaggerated by the Muslim authors. In order to prove his thesis the author has discussed at length the cognate terms and concepts of *Ahl, Al* and *Dhurrlya*, in the light of the Qur’ān and the explanations of the lexicographets and philologists.

Falling in line with other eminent Shi‘i scholars and writers the author also regards the event of the Saqīfa Banī Sā‘ida (the site is still extant in Medina), where the people swore allegiance (*bay‘a*) to Abū Bakr as the first Caliph of Islam, as the point at which the community (*Umma*) was divided into two camps—the Sunnite majority and the Shi‘at-*Ali* minority. It will be interesting to note that the learned author at another place writes: “It will suffice here to note in passing that the decision taken in (the) Saqīfa was also in conformity with the common practice and ancient traditions of the Arabs, at least of one important group, from among them”. (p. 11). In this connection the author records the names of 13 prominent *Saḥāba* including Abū Ayyūb (Zayd ibn Khālid) al-Anṣārī al-Khazrajī, the host of the Prophet on his migration to Medina, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, *Amīr* ibn Yāsir, and al-Zubayr ibn al-*Awwām* al-Qurashi who delayed for some time, from three to six months, the acceptance of Abū Bakr’s election and refused to recognise him as the Caliph. In the words of the author “the event of the Saqīfa should be taken as a generic name for the first split among the Muslims, historically it is an event which is inextricably connected with the emergence of the Shi‘i viewpoint”. (p. 27). As against this established Shi‘ite view of the happenings at the Saqīfa it would not be far from the truth to say that the seed of ‘parliamentary’ democracy in Islam, as the system is now current, was actually sown in that small assembly-hall or shed belonging to the Banū Sā‘ida, a sub-tribe of the Anṣār. Commenting on al-Ṭabarī’s account of the Saqīfa the author says that he makes it absolutely clear that there was a strong body of support for *‘Ali*, but on the other hand, emphasises that Abū Bakr was duly elected by the majority of the people. (p. 41). However, he remarks that keeping in view the arguments and counter-arguments at the Saqīfa, the choice of Abū Bakr seems to have been an accident of circumstances. (p. 49). Quoting several important writers including al-Ṭabarī and al-Baladhuri the author says that on *‘Ali*’s hesitation or refusal to pay homage
to the elected Caliph, 'Umar along with Abû Bakr attacked 'Ali's house with an armed party and set it on fire. With drawn swords when they tried to gate-crash, suddenly Fâtimah, the daughter of the Prophet, appeared at the door-way in a furious mood and cried reproachfully:

"You have left the body of the Apostle with us and you have decided among yourselves without consulting us, and without respecting our rights. Before God, I say, either you get out of here at once or with my hair dishevelled I will make my appeal to God". (pp. 50-51).

These are very serious and painful allegations and one is constrained to remark that the entire incident was really unfortunate and should not have been allowed to happen. History cannot pass a favourable judgment on those involved in the armed attack on the house of Fâtimah, the Sayyidat al-Nisâ' and the mother of the grandsons of the Prophet. The use of force has never been instrumental in achieving a satisfactory solution of political problems and differences.

On pp. 65-67 the author reproduces a dialogue from al-Tabari (I:2769-70) which is said to have taken place between 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and 'Abd Allâh ibn 'Abbâs during the Caliphate of 'Umar. When 'Umar told Ibn 'Abbâs that he was reported to have said that the Banû Hâshim thought that the Caliphate had been snatched from them through oppression and envy Ibn 'Abbâs replied that both oppression and envy were obvious and evident. Thereupon 'Umar lost his temper and retorted, "Alas! O Banû Hâshim, your hearts are full of hatred, rancour and false pretensions". Al-Tabari is generally regarded as a reliable historian but the question here arises as to how would a private conversation that took place between two persons be faithfully recorded, word for word, many centuries after its occurrence. It was not such an important event that could have been reduced to writing and carefully preserved for the generations to come. Secondly, could any one imagine a responsible person, a close associate and Companion of the Prophet, one of the early Muslims (al-sâbiqûn al-awwalîn), occupying the Caliphal seat accuse Banû Hâshim, the agnates and cognates of the Prophet, of harbouring hatred, rancour and false pretensions in view of the āya tâthîr (Qur'ân, XXXIII: 33). While reading this dialogue one is irresistibly reminded of a conversation that took place between Jalâl al-Dîn Khaljî, the Slave king of Delhi and Qâdî Mughîth as recorded by the Indian historian Dhîyâ'-i Barani, which has been proved to be reflective of the ideas of the historian himself rather than of the Khaljî king. (Cf. Ta'rikh-i Firûz Shâhî, Bib. Indica, pp. 290-96, Urdu translation Lahore 1969, pp. 425-33.)

Summing up his comments on the rule of the first two Caliphs and the attitude of 'Ali towards them the author remarks: On the whole, the Caliphate of 'Umar, as that of his predecessor Abû Bakr, characterizes a period in which Islamic ideals of simplicity, justice, equality, devotion to the cause, zeal for the faith, and a socio-economic equilibrium, according to their understanding of these, were best represented." (p. 67). Criticizing the appointment of the Shâhî by the dying Caliph 'Umar, who had been stabbed
by a Persian (Magian) slave, the author says that “through these meticulous arrangements 'Umar completed the task of keeping the Caliphate away from the Banû Hashim, an endeavour he had undertaken immediately after the Prophet's death.” (p. 69).

Referring to the controversies which gripped the community during the Caliphate of 'Uthmân and the criticism levelled against him by Abû Dharr al-Ghifārî, “a fearless and uncompromising partisan of frugality and asceticism who violently protested against the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few and demanded the distribution of lands among the community” the author quotes him as saying in the Prophet's mosque, on the authority of al-Ya'qūbî:-

“... 'Ali is the legatee (waṣṭ) of Muḥammad and the inheritor (wārīth) of his knowledge. O' you bewildered and perplexed community after its Prophet, if you give preference (in leadership) to those whom God has given preference, and set aside those whom God has set aside, and if you firmly place the succession and inheritance in the people of the House of your Prophet, you will certainly be prosperous and your means of subsistence will be made ample” (Ta'rikh, II: 171; author's p. 83).

On the strength of al-Ya'qūbî's above statement it would not be unfair to assume that Abû Dharr al-Ghifārî was not penalised so much for his so-called revolutionary economic theories and the demand for equitable distribution of wealth as for his activities prejudicial to the state and his branding the ruling Caliph and his predecessors as usurpers. Nevertheless one must say that the policy adopted by the third Caliph in appointing members of the Banû Umayya to responsible posts and offices was impolitic and was not in the best interests of the Ummâ and the State as it generated discontent and resentment among the people leading to disaffection and political disgruntlement.

Incidentally the inclusion of this passage shows the method of treatment of a very crucial and controversial phase in the annals of early Islam adopted by the author and his care in maintaining balance and objectivity— in fact a very difficult task— because not very often the personal prejudices and proclivities of an author overcome him leading him away from the straight path, and in writing history such deviations are a common feature. It is why certain historians of early Islam have been accused of showing favour to one party to the prejudice of the other howsoever fair, balanced and objective their treatment of a certain event might have been.

Al-Ya'qūbî, although not accused of having anti-Abû Bakr or anti-'Umar leanings, is well-known for his pro-'Alid tendencies and his preference for the members of the household of the Prophet. In so far as the love and respect for the Prophet's household is concerned every Muslim is enjoined upon to do so, and al-Ya'qūbî is not an exception.

The garrison-town of Kufa, founded in 17/638, during the Caliphate of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, which played a very important and significant role in the development of Shi'ism and which saw many a stormy and tragic events including the martyrdom of Ḥusayn ibn 'Ali has received very full treatment by the author. The main emphasis laid, in the description of the city, is on the heterogeneous character of its population consist-
BOOK REVIEWS

173

of the Arab muqātila and the Persian mawāl, whose general structure, characteristics, and features which influenced the religio-political tendencies and aspirations of the people have been fully discussed and described. The reader gets a very clear picture of the complex factors—geographical, historical, ethnic, racial, political and economic—which determined the complexion and character of its multi-racial population resulting in shifting loyalties. Unfortunately the behaviour of the Kūfans first towards ‘Ali and later towards his son, the imām al-Ḥusayn, either under political pressure from the Umayyads or due to the psychological factors which moulded their character as individuals, has been the subject of much criticism and their fickle-mindedness has become almost proverbial. Dr. Jafri has pieced together all the fragments of information about the Umayyad and pre-Umayyad Kūfā and very admirably knit them into a highly readable account.

The author has ably underlined the swerving loyalties of the Kūfāns, consisting mostly of the Yemenis and the non-Arab mawāl, who “whenever they saw any hope of success of some one from the Ahl al-Bayr, they swarmed around him; practically, they deserted him as soon as they saw the hope of success dwindling away”. (p. 125). He adds that the people of Kūfā lacked the necessary courage or the firmness of character to face a crisis or withstand a moment of trial. In fact their behaviour had been very accurately and wisely prejudged when the imām al-Ḥusayn was told, by the famous poet Faraḏzdaq, while on his way to Karbala, that the hearts of the Kūfāns were with him but their swords were with Yazid.

Referring to the abdication of al-Ḥasan ibn ’Ali the author says that the struggle between al-Ḥasan and Muʿāwiya has not yet been thoroughly and critically studied and remains one of the most obscure chapters of early Islamic history. (p. 137). He further says that J. Wellhausen while describing the abdication of al-Ḥasan in his “The Arab Kingdom and Its Fall”, (Culcutta 1927), depended solely on al-Yaʿqūbī, al-Dinawari and al-Ṭabarī but “all these three sources suffer from a common weakness in that their renderings lack the exact sequence of events, a problem which makes it difficult to determine whether Ḥasan abdicated of his own free will or was forced by circumstances to do so”. (p. 138). Relying on the Kitāb al-Futah of Ibn Aṭham al-Kūfī (d. 356/967), the Maqātil al-Ṭalibiyin of Abū’l Faraj al-Īṣbahānī (d. 356/967), and the Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāgha of Ibn Abī’l Ḥadīd (d. 655/1257), the author has attempted to prove that al-Ḥasan did not abdicate of his own free will although he was by nature peace-loving, had a distaste for politics and its dissensions, and nurtured the desire to avoid wide-spread bloodshed among the Muslims. Muʿāwiya, a clever and skilful politician as he was, created a situation which forced the hands of al-Ḥasan to accept the terms offered him for electing to abdicate in favour of the latter who was fired with the ambition to seize the Caliphate for himself as and when circumstances warranted it. Unfortunately many Western scholars, including G.E. von Grunebaum opine that by his act of abdication “Ḥasan sold his rights to the throne to Muʿāwiya”. (cf. his Medieval Islam, Chicago 1953, p. 186).

This is, however, doing injustice to history as it has been admitted on all hands that al-Ḥasan ibn ’Ali was a peace-loving man who abjured shedding the blood of the Muslims in order to gain his personal ends; secondly, a man of his calibre and dispositi on was
averse to be known as a wordly person as he was given to leading a clean and untarnished life.

On the tragedy of Karbalā, the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn, of which the author gives a very plaintive, mournful but lucid and vivid account, he makes the following significant observations:-

“It is rather disappointing to note that Western scholarship on Islam, given too much to historicism, has placed all its attention on the discrete (discreet?) external aspects of the event of Karbalā and has never tried to analyse the inner history and agonizing conflict in Ḥusayn's mind. Anatomy of the human body can give knowledge of the various parts and their composition, but cannot give us an understanding of man himself. In the case of Ḥusayn, a careful study and analysis of the events of Karbalā as a whole reveals the fact that a victory achieved through military strength and might is always temporal (temporary?), because another stronger power can in course of time bring it down in ruins. But a victory achieved through suffering and sacrifice is everlasting and leaves permanent imprints on man's consciousness. Ḥusayn was brought up in the lap of the Founder of Islam and had inherited the love and devotion to the Islamic way of life from his father. As time went on he noticed the great changes which were rapidly taking place in the community in regard to religious feelings and morality. The natural process of conflict and struggle between action and reaction was now at work. That is, Muḥammad's progressive Islamic action had succeeded in suppressing Arab conservatism embodied in heathen pre-Islamic practices and ways of thinking. But in less than thirty years' time this Arab conservatism revitalized itself as a forceful reaction to challenge Muḥammad's action once again. The forces of this reaction had already moved into motion with the rise of Mu'awiya, but the succession of Yazid was a clear sign that the reactionary forces had mobilized themselves and had now re-emerged with full vigour. The strength of this reaction embodied in Yazid's character was powerful enough to suppress or at least deface Muḥammad's action. Islam was now, in the thinking of Ḥusayn in need of reactivation of Muḥammad's action against the old Arabian reaction and thus required a complete shake-up. Such a shake-up would not have been so effective at the time of Ḥasan, for his rival Mu'awiya, though he had little regard for religion, at least outwardly tried to veil his reactionary attitude of the old Arabism, Yazid did not care even for this; he exposed these pretensions and his conduct amounted to open ridicule of Muḥammad's Sunna and Qur'ānic norms.” (pp. 201-202).

The author maintains that it was simply unthinkable that Ḥusayn, the grandson of the Prophet, after the death of his elder brother, Ḥasan, now the head of Muḥammad's family and the embodiment of his Sunna, would have acquiesced in the openly reactionary attitude of Yazid against Islamic norms. This is one of the most convincing explanations of the gruesome tragedy resulting in the heartless massacre of the noblest sons of Islam. May their memory ever live green!

In the context of the movement of the penitents (the Tawwābūn) the statement of Sulaymān ibn Ṣurad al-Khuza'i who has been described as “the one praised for his in-
BOOK REVIEWS

trepidity and for his religion and the one who has been dependable and reliable in his judiciousness and prudence”, (p. 223) is indeed revealing and astonishing. When urged to come out in the open and pursue those responsible for shedding the blood of Ḥusayn he pointed out “that the murderers of Ḥusayn were in fact the Ashrāf al-qabā'il of Kufa”. (p. 224). In the words of the author the movement of the Tawwābi'īn, being totally a religious affair, pushed Shi'ism another step forward towards an independent and self-sustaining existence.” (p. 233).

Imām Zayn al-'Ābidin, the only surviving son of Ḥusayn ibn 'Ali, naturally “bore a deep grudge against he Umayyads, holding them responsible for the massacre of his father and all other family members”. (p. 238). In spite of that he refrained from showing any enmity or hostility to the Umayyads who also tried to maintain good relations with him. All praise to the great imām for his astute policy which saved the Umma and his own family from further bloodshed and internal strife.

The last two chapters of the book are fully reflective of the creed of Shi'ism and describe very lucidly and effectively the doctrine of the Imāmate, which “is a prerogative bestowed by God, upon a chosen person, from the family of the Prophet, who before his death and with the guidance of God, transfers the Imāmate to another (person) by an explicit designation (Naṣṣ)”. (p. 290). The doctrine of the Imāmate as expounded and explained by the imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq and his contribution to the strengthening of Shi'ism forms the subject-matter of the concluding chapter and is highly illuminating and educative.

An extensive and detailed bibliography, comprising works both in the Oriental and Western languages, adds to the value and usefulness of the book, the first of its kind in English by a Muslim. It is without doubt a very precious and welcome addition to the literature on Shi'ite Islam especially in view of the fact that it has been written by a scholar belonging to that sect.

Moreover, it is to say the least an excellent monograph and a very well-written and happy addition to the few such books as we already have on the subject. The author shows a sound and thorough acquaintance with both the classical Arabic and Persian sources and works by modern authors. The book has been accomplished with great erudition and painstaking research and incorporates a vast amount of historical material as distinguished from merely credal accounts. As would be clear the learned author is credited with having made the most thorough investigation on Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq and his significant role in the development and crystallisation of Shi'ism as a distinct branch of Islam. It is without exaggeration an important contribution to our knowledge of Shi'ite religion. The Western scholars will particularly find it useful in exploding many a myth and sweeping away many a heretical statement attributed to the Shi'ites. Let it be very clearly understood that if the Sunnite majority is the right arm of the body-politic of Islam the Shi'ite minority is its equally strong left arm.

The theme of this book is immense. The secular historian will find here a reservoir of accurate facts which may help to correct the inaccuracies and distortions which
mar even learned works of intensive research. It can be quite safely said that many will find faith and hope renewed after reading this book. To disregard the Shi'ite sect as a significant factor in the affairs of the world of Islam will result in a distorted picture of Islamic history. And that is really the bane of the situation.

Karachi;  

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