The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Imam al-Baqir and the Doctrine of Imamate

A Reading Guide To

Early Shi'i Thought: The Teachings of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir
by Dr. Arzina R. Lalani (I.B. Tauris, London and New York, in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, 2000)
xiii + 192 pp. ISBN 1-86064-434-1

Muslim society is, and always has been, pluralistic. Within a few decades after the death of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s), the Muslim world became a mosaic of cultures. The cultural plurality was matched by a plurality of ideas and doctrines. Immediately after the Prophet, the nascent Islamic community faced its first crisis around the issue of the leadership of the Muslims: who should lead the community after the Prophet? Muslims were divided on this question and in due course of time it served as a springboard from which various conceptions of authority emerged, the most important of which were associated with the Shi'a, Sunni and Khariji.[1] It is important to note that while the impetus for these interpretations existed from the earliest time in Islamic history, it was only over a long period that doctrines and beliefs of the Shi'a and Sunni communities became crystallised.

In contrast to the multifarious nature of these developments in early Islamic history, modern scholarship on this period was until recently coloured largely by the Sunni point of view. Among other reasons, this was partly due to the lack of accessibility of Shi'i sources to the scholars. Work of scholars such as Vladimir Ivanow, Louis Massignon and Henry Corbin went a long way in rectifying the situation by bringing to surface numerous Shi'i works. One of the valuable outcomes of the Iranian revolution in 1979 was a surge in scholarly interest in the history and doctrines of the Shi'i Muslims.[2] Despite these developments it can still be argued that the early phase of Shi'i Islam has still not received the attention of scholarship it deserves. In this context, therefore, Dr. Arzina Lalani's work on early Shi'i history is a timely contribution.[3]

The book is the first systematic account in English of the life, career and teachings of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, one of the most erudite Muslims of the 2nd/ 8th century. Using hitherto largely ignored Shi'i sources, both Ismaili and Twelver Shi'a, the book attempts to highlight the intellectual contributions of Imam al-Baqir. These

---

[1] While the Kharijite were the first group to secede from the main body of Muslims, today they are only in tiny minorities in a few countries.

[2] Heinz Halm, *Shiism* (Edinburgh, 1991).

[3] Aziz Esmail and Azim Nanji discuss the inadequacies of studies on the Shia and particularly the Ismailis, and relate them to various contemporary and historical factors in their paper 'The Ismailis in History', in S. Hussain Nasr (ed.), *Ismaili Contributions to Islamic Culture* (Tehran, 1977). Farhad Daftary provides a historical overview of studies on the Ismailis in his *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990), chapter 1.

contributions are situated within the religious, social, political and intellectual milieu of the time. Particular attention is given to Imam al-Baqir's vital role in the formulation of the function and nature of the Imamate.

Those interested in the development of the idea of Imamate will find this book of particular value. It will also appeal to those interested in early Shi'i history, as well as in the history of ideas and the relationship between thought and society generally.

The fact that very few Shi'i works are actually available from the time of Imam al-Baqir himself, makes the task of any author difficult sifting through the sources and establishing authenticity of the information. In view of this, the breadth of sources used in the book is commendable. Many of the sources used in the study belong to the 3rd/9th century of Islamic history. Thus, these sources portray the status of Imam al-Baqir as perceived more than a century after him. The writers of these sources would surely have been influenced by the political, intellectual and social conditions of their time. In other words, these later sources "represent not only the beliefs of the Muslims of the time but constitute the mirror in which the Shi'i consciousness revealed its own aspirations."[4]

Structure of the book

The first chapter traces the developments in Shi'i history from Hazrat 'Ali to Imam al-Baqir. In this context, the emergence of various other intellectual, religious and political movements is also discussed. The chapter provides a lucid summary of key events until the time of Imam al-Baqir. United by its allegiance to Hazrat 'Ali (s.a.s), the Shi'i movement at this time consisted of various groups led by "different members of the gradually increasing family of 'Ali b. Abi Talib."[5]

The second chapter focuses on the idea of Imamate before the time of Imam al-Baqir. After Hazrat 'Ali, Muawiya had laid the foundation of the Umayyad dynasty. Many supporters of the *ahl al-bayt* (the family of the Prophet) considered the Umayyads to be the usurpers of political leadership of the Muslims. The chapter argues that while support for the family of the Prophet is said to have existed from the earliest time in Muslim history, the event of Karbala (61AH/ 680 CE) provided a focal point for the articulation of sentiments *for* the family of the Prophet as well as *against* the rule of the Umayyads. Karbala, where Imam Hussain and his companions were martyred, marks the climax of Umayyad persecution of *ahl al-bayt*. The event of Karbala, therefore, served as a religio-political symbol that gave meaning and emotion to various Shi'i movements. The author discusses several of these movements and we shall look at some of these below.

In chapter three, the life and career of Imam Al-Baqir are discussed. When Imam Baqir's father, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin, died in 94 AH/ 714 CE, there was a disagreement among the Shi'is about the legitimate successor as the Imam from among Hazrat 'Ali's various descendants. Hence, various groups were claiming the Imamate for their leaders. The Kaysaniyya and Zaydiyya were the most prominent of these groups.

Chapter four discusses Imam al-Baqir's doctrine of Imamate explicating the Qur'anic and *hadith* basis for them. This chapter is indeed the heart of the book. It discusses at

---

[4] Lalani, *Early Shi'i Thought,* p.19
[5] W. Ivanow, 'Early Shiite Movements', in *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1941), vol. 17, p.1

length the distinguishing features of Imam al-Baqir's claim to the Imamate and provides some reasons for its success.

Chapters five to seven discuss Imam al-Baqir's contributions to theological debate, the development of *hadith* literature and in the field of jurisprudence.

The life and times of Imam al -Baqir

Born in 57 AH/ 677 CE, Imam al-Baqir's full name was Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Al-Hussain b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib. Around this time Muawiya had already strengthened his rule and was seeking the oath of allegiance for his son Yazid, thus laying the foundations of the Umayyad dynasty. According to Shi'i traditions, Imam al-Baqir succeeded to the Imamate in 94 AH/ 714 CE in Medina after the death of his father, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin.

As mentioned earlier, divisions on the question of who should lead the Muslim community over time became extremely complicated. Through the course of first three centuries in Muslim history, many other issues also led to debates and arguments between different schools of thought. These issues included the definition of a true Muslim and the question of human responsibility and freewill. One author has compared the dynamic nature of these and other religo-political debates to "chemical reactions, as opposed to the precipitate left once the reactions have followed their course."[6] Implicit in this dynamism was a desire to live according to the ideals of Islam within the context of changing time. People with Shi'i sentiments looked up to the guidance of their Imams to achieve this goal. This desire was also the engine behind attempts, particularly in law, to create a system that would provide a way of living in line with the ideals of Islam.[7]

In the life of Imam al-Baqir one sees a reflection of the venturesome times he lived in. His life reflects a concerted engagement with the salient ideas of his time, which enabled him to leave his mark on the intellectual life of the period. Yet he was no revolutionary and opposed armed revolt against the Umayyads. He advocated what the author calls "the idea of a non-rebelling imamate" and sought to attract followers through the pen rather than the sword. His title *baqir al-ilm,* meaning 'one who splits open knowledge',[8] succinctly portrays his approach to the issues of his time.[9]

The book brings out Imam al-Baqir's contributions in several areas. Here, we shall focus on his articulation of the doctrine of Imamate to illustrate the social and political concerns of his time and his response to them. As mentioned earlier, there were many claimants to the Imamate during the time of Imam al-Baqir. A brief discussion of these can provide useful insight in this regard.

The Kayasannia were groups that traced their claim to Imamate through the third son of Hazrat 'Ali, Muhammad al-Hanafiyya.[10] Differences as to who was the rightful

---

[6] Aziz Esmail, 'Islam and Modernity: Intellectual Horizons', in *The Muslim Almanac,* ed. Azim Nanji, (Detroit, 1996)

[7] Neguin Yavari, 'Evolving nature of the *Sharia'* in *The Ismaili Canada,* (July 1999). This article discusses the historical evolution and current perceptions of the *Sharia.*

[8] In Islamic tradition knowledge was sometimes conceived of by analogy of tree with roots and branches. The idea of splitting knowledge may imply this analogous understanding of knowledge and, according to Lalani, suggests that al-Baqir was regarded as one who could go to the roots or principles of knowledge.

[9] The author explores the significance of this title, especially its significance in fortifying spiritual links between the Prophet and the Imam al-Baqir's claim to Imamate.

[10] Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya was a son of Hazrat Ali through his wife Khawla of the Banu Hanifa,

Imam from this line created several branches within the Kaysaniyya. An important feature of these groups was the idea of *nass* (explicit designation of successor) as the basis of their claim to succession. As we will see, the idea of *nass* also played a significant role in Imam al-Baqir's formulation of Imamate.

Another group of people at that time gave its support to Zayd, Imam al-Baqir's half-brother. The group later came to be known as Zaydiyya. While there are differences among historians about the motives of Zayd's claims to leadership, in time the distinctive feature of his group was their position that the Imam would have to be able to launch an uprising against the illegitimate rulers, which in this case were seen to be the Umayyads.[11] They, therefore, articulated the leadership criteria in political and militaristic terms. Furthermore, they did not attach any significance to hereditary succession and to *nass*.

An important conclusion drawn by the author from this diversity of groups is that "for most of the early Shi'i sympathisers it did not matter who the leader was, provided he was a Hashimid."[12] These groups and individuals were trying to gain popular support and their conceptions of Imamate were partly an appeal to the needs of the people they were trying to win over.[13]

Furthermore, in many of these early Shi'i movements it is difficult to separate religious sentiments from social aspirations. As mentioned earlier, Umayyad rule was opposed in several quarters of the society. The sources of resentment were many and ranged from racial inequality to the feeling of usurpation of the right of the family of the Prophet. One such discontented group was called *mawalis*. These were the non-Arab Muslims who were attached to Arab tribes for protection and status. They resented the low status they were given and their espousal of Shi'i causes was one of the ways in which they expressed this dissatisfaction.

Imam al –Baqir's claim to Imamate

Imam al-Baqir's exposition of Imamate must be seen in the social and intellectual context outlined above: the entrenched and oppressive nature of Umayyad rule, disputes over the question of leadership and the rise of discontented groups. Not to do so would be, in the words of Durkheim, "to separate it from the living springs from whence it flows; it is to render it impossible to understand."[14] However, as the author points out, "Shi'ism has usually been explained with reference to political and social factors. More emphasis needs to be placed on the religious phenomenon of Shi'a Islam." Without sacrificing the social context, the book's key objective is to contribute to this latter need. Thus, the author focuses on the religious arguments for Imam al-Baqir's claim to Imamate.

The salient points of Imam al-Baqir's theory of Imamate can be summarised as follows: It is established from the Qur'an and hadith that the Prophet appointed Imam 'Ali as his successor. This explicit designation *(nass)* was accompanied by the Prophet bequeathing his knowledge *(ilm)* and light *(nur)* to Hazrat 'Ali. The *ilm* and *nur* that the Imam possesses by virtue of *nass* renders him *masum,* or protected from error and

---

whom he married after the death of his first wife Hazrat Fatima (Daftary, *The Ismailis,* p.52).

[11] Daftary, *The Ismailis, p.* 70

[12] Hashimid here means those who belonged to the tribe of Banu Hashim, deriving their name from the great grandfather of the Prophet, Hashim b. Abd Manaf. Lalani, p. 43. See also the genealogical chart in the book.

[13] Lalani, p.10

[14] Emile Durkheim, 'Westermarck, The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas', in *Durkheim: Essays on Morals and Eeducation, (ed.)* W. Pickering, (London, 1979)

sin. Chapter Four of the book is essentially an elaboration of this theory.[15]

Imam al-Baqir's approach to establishing a Qur'anic basis for the Imamate consists of commenting upon particular verses of the Qur'an and providing an interpretation to support his claim. These interpretations eventually formed the basis of the articulation of the concept of Imamate by many later Shi'i writers such as the Ismaili jurist al-Qadi al-Numan (d. 363 AH/ 974 CE) and the Twelver Shi'i scholar, al-Kulayni (d. 329 AH/ 940-941 CE).

In the time of Imam al-Baqir, the traditions of the Prophet were also gaining importance as important sources of Muslim theology and law. The Imam, thus, adduced further proof in support of his claim to Imamate from the Traditions of the Prophet. He saw the famous event of Ghadir Khumm and the Prophet's *hadith* related to it as among the most important Traditions in this connection. In discussing this and other Traditions, Dr. Lalani brings out the controversies and differences of opinions that arose surrounding particular words or phrases.

What is particularly interesting is that the author marshals both the Shi'i and the Sunni understandings of particular verses and traditions of the Prophet discussed by Imam al-Baqir to support his claim. The reader, therefore, gets an opportunity to see the contested nature of the concept of Imamate at that time. This also helps in creating a more informed discussion around the early history of this fundamental concept of Shi'i Islam.

It can be seen that Imam al-Baqir was advocating a view of the Imamate that was pacifist and non-militaristic. With hindsight, this reflects a realistic assessment of the political situation of the time in which the Umayyads were militarily unassailable. The Imam was emphasising a spiritual and intellectual role for himself as opposed to a political one. His emphasis on *nass* gave him advantage over other contenders for the Imamate due to his prestigious genealogy, as both his paternal and maternal grandfathers were the Prophet's grandsons. At a time when genealogies played a major role in defining one's status, this emphasis on *nass* not only helped bring some order to the complexity of the situation but also provided a systematic foundation for a stable source of authority. His emphasis on Imam's authoritative knowledge or *ilm,* was in line with his attempt to create a pacifist concept of Imam. Instead of the sword, the source of legitimacy was redefined to flow from the pen and the intellect. As the two main Shi'i branches - Ismailis and Twelvers - traced their doctrine of Imamate through the Imams Jaffar as-Sadiq and al-Baqir, it is reasonable to argue that the theory of the Imamate explicated by Imam al-Baqir eventually turned out to be the most enduring of competing theories.

Conclusion
The final three chapters of the book highlight Imam al-Baqir's contribution to other, related discourses - theological and legal - of his time. Many of his formulations continue to provide fruitful material for thinking about the issues faced by early Muslims. For example, his distinction between *Islam* and *iman* (faith) continues to be one of the most quoted ones. He also grappled with the ever pertinent problem of freewill and predestination.

---

[15] There is a very accessible discussion of the terms *ilm, nur* and *isma,* in the fourth chapter of the book, particularly pp. 76 -83. The reader may find this discussion particularly useful for its historical background to these terms.

During Imam al-Baqir's time people were beginning to collect and compare authentic Traditions from the Prophet, the *hadith*. The Imam is credited with shaping the Shi'i approach to *hadith*. In contrast to Sunni compilations of *hadith* which were confined to the sayings and doings of the Prophet, the Shi'a define *hadith*s as the statements of the Prophet and the Imams transmitted to a later generation.[16] This conception of *hadith* can be derived from Imam al-Baqir's theory of Imamate as the repository of knowledge inherited from the Prophet.[17] While Imam al-Baqir's unique position in Shi'i *hadith* collections is not surprising, he is also "unanimously esteemed in non-Shi'i circles as one of the most trustworthy authorities on the traditions of the Prophet..."[18]

The study of Imam al-Baqir's life and teachings is relevant to us in several ways. The question of authority in Islam remains just as germane and relevant today as in Imam al-Baqir's time. In grappling with this issue, a well-informed historical outlook is very valuable. Here, Imam al-Baqir's life and thought helps us to understand how the doctrine of Imamate evolved in the early period of Muslim history: his interpretations of terms such as *nur, nass* and *ilm* are very illuminating in understanding the historical debate around the question of authority. Similarly, his responses to many perennial issues such as human freedom and responsibility are thought provoking and enrich our understanding of them. However, his greatest legacy lies probably in reminding us that intellectual life in Islam is capable of engagement with the questions and concerns of one's time - a lesson worth remembering today.

———————————

Farid Panjwani,
Education Officer, Department of Education and
IIS-ITREB Liaison Department,
The Institute of Ismaili Studies

---

[16] Lalani, p.103
[17] — — p.103
[18] — — p. 96