Origins of Shi'ism: A Consensus of Western Scholarship

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Table of Contents

1. Part One: BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION
   1.1 INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS
   3. 1.2. METHOD AND SCOPE
   4. 1.3. WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP ON ISLAM
   5. 1.4. WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP ON SHI'A ISLAM
   6. 1.5. SUMMARY OF SHI'A ISLAM
   7. Part Two: SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATIONS OF SOME EARLY EVENTS OF SHI'ISM
      8. 2.1. INTRODUCTION
      9. 2.2. THE GHADIR KHUMM
     10. 2.3. THE PEN
     11. 2.4. THE SAQIFA BANU SA'IDA
     12. Part Three: SHI'I HISTORIOGRAPHY
        13. 3.1. INITIAL QUESTIONS
        14. 3.2. SHI'I HISTORY: REMEMBERED, RECOVERED, OR INVENTED?
        15. 3.3 CONCLUSIONS
        16. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Part One: BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

1.1 INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

History is interpretation. It is not merely that, as the maxim says, the victors are the ones who write the history books. Nor is it merely that the victors actively choose to preserve certain aspects of history and let other aspects fall away into the historical abyss of forgetfulness. More, happenings of far-reaching import, by the very fact of their occurring, passively mold our understandings of their antecedent influences. Borges declares that "every writes creates his own precursors."[1] The events which occur as consequences of historical trends retrospectively shape our understanding of those very trends.

In this investigation I seek to analyze the historicity of one of these happenings. The Shi'a[2] party of Islam occupies a unique place in Muslim history and historiography. Shi'ism claims for itself a clearly distinguishable historical development. It claims that its origins were clearly set in place by the prophet Muhammad and that its line of subsequent development was equally unimpeachable. The opponents of Shi'ism, particularly the Sunnis, declare that Shi'ism has misrepresented its origins and has willfully fabricated many aspects of its historical development.
The question of the facticity of Shi'ism's historical claims cannot be resolved. A millennium of Shi'i-Sunni agonistics demonstrates conclusively that, given the available documents, no incontestable conclusions can be drawn. Whether Shi'ism or Sunnism has the better recollection of history will remain an open question. However, this initially-acknowledged inability to arrive at any definitive conclusion need not preclude an historical investigation of the question. Were history confined to examinations guaranteed to produce definite results, historians would have little work, indeed. However, in many cases the task of the historian is not to draw conclusions; Islamicist Bernard Lewis writes that “the essential and distinctive feature of [historical] scholarly research is, or should be, that it is not directed to predetermined results.”[3] The task of history, if honest about its limitations, should be either to trace themes and trends to determine what events most likely happened along with the hows and why's, or to attempt to weigh the balance of an historical argument. This is what I will do with the case of Shi'a Islam. My intentionally malapropian title reflects this--the idea of "a" consensus is oxymoronic. The Oxford English Dictionary defines consensus as "the collective unanimous opinion of a number of persons."[4] Since there can be only one such opinion, the proper usage would be "The Consensus of Western Scholarship." My intent is that it is possible to arrive at a conclusion based on the available sources and yet be clear about the role of interpretation and the factors of ambiguity that bear upon the investigation, factors which I will present in part three of this paper.

1.2. METHOD AND SCOPE

One aspect of the scope of this paper which required a great deal of consideration was what historical period to examine. I have chosen to restrict my investigation to events that occurred during and shortly after the life of the Prophet. My initial impulse was to trace the lines of the first six Imams as well as the events before 632 C.E. In so doing I would have covered the history claimed by the vast majority of contemporary Shi'iis, for the first six Imams are accepted as authoritative by both the Isma'ilis ("Seveners") and the Ithna 'Ashariya ("Twelvers"). However, even this limited scope would gloss over a great deal of factionalization prior to the death of the sixth Imam; Moojan Momen lists twenty-seven major divisions arising before the death of Ja'far as-Sadiq alone.[5] My scope thus will be to examine the Shi'i claims up to and including the alleged rejection of 'Ali with the election of Abu Bakr at the "porch of Banu Sa'ida."[6]

The origins of Shi'ism are not simply shrouded in uncertainty because of the passing of time or the loss of original documents. Rather, in light of the millennium of Shi'a-Sunni debate, both factions have consciously defined their own history to the exclusion of the other's. I do not mean to imply that they have intentionally distorted history, for each faction has sincerely felt their historiography to be correct. Nonetheless, the very fact that their respective historiographies were created in self-conscious contradistinction to that of their opponent renders both projects suspect in accuracy. Momen sums up the problem: "In considering Shi'i history, especially in the early period, it is necessary to differentiate between the traditional history as recorded by the Shi'i writers and results of modern critical scholarship."[7] Momen chose to present both the traditional and the Western critical findings but in separate and clearly-defined chapters, and only the latter does he choose to name "historical."[8] I have chosen to restrict my sources to non-Muslim works or, where using Muslim ones, to be careful to sift "fact" from partisanship. Again, I do not in any way mean by this that partisanship is mutually exclusive of fact or vice versa; the very word "fact," from L. facere, "to make," has in its etymology the connotation of "fiction."[9] Nonetheless, often there is a difference in tenor and occasionally even in objectivity between Orientalist versus partisan scholarship, and I must focus on the former.

Since this paper is an examination of Shi'i history through the eyes of western scholarship, I found it necessary to survey the latter, as well. This I have done in two initial sections where I outline the state of Western scholarship on Islam and then on Shi'ism particularly. This discussion is necessary to clarify what types of sources are available both for this paper and for the study of Shi'ism as a whole. Following this I present a summary of Shi'i history. For a paper such as this I must, of course, assume a familiarity with at least the generals of Islamic history, so my intent in summarizing the main events of Shi'ism is not to enlighten the reader. Rather, I found that a summary of this history inserted before the body of the investigation was a great help in locating the focus of this study, and the reader may find it equally helpful. Following this I examine in as great a depth as possible, using the English secondary sources, Shi'ism's foundational events of early Islam. In concluding I will attempt to present whatever verdicts I can deduce on the historical claims of Shi'ism. This attempt will be facilitated by bringing to bear critical discussions of the meaning and function of historiography in both Shi'ism and in the broader spectrum of Islam. Though I admit up front that no conclusions about facticity can be reached, I do believe that insights into the project of history in Shi'ism--how discrepancies between Shi'i and Sunni histories are explained, how much stock the Shi'is themselves place in their versions of history, to what extent the Shi'i historians did or did not embellish or even invent aspects of their history, and the import of history for Shi'ism's self-unfolding--can be gleaned from such an analysis.

1.3. WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP ON ISLAM

Until relatively recently, Western scholars have tended to overlook the study of Islam. Though Islam has existed as a major chapter in human history for almost fourteen hundred years, Westerners have only given it any serious and objective attention for a century or so. Some Muslim scholars have tended to see a willful rejection of Islam in this neglect,[10] but in fact the main reason that Islam has been overlooked by the scholarly community is much more prosaic.
For the most part, the eyes of Western scholars of religion didn’t even begin to turn eastwards until the mid-1800s. The seminal event, so to speak, was the appearance of the first volumes of the series Sacred Books of the East, edited by Max Müller, which Oxford Press began publishing in the 1870s.[11] This monumental collection of translations of non-Western religious texts marks the inception of active scholarly interest in “Eastern” religions, especially Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Orientalist studies of Islam were not necessarily inspired by this new East-West connection, but the shift in the spectrum of comparative religion can nonetheless be dated from around this time.[12] It would thus be improper to see the lack of scholarly interest in Islam before the twentieth century as being motivated by anything other than historical happenstance.

This is not to say that Islam has been neglected by the West; only that responsible academic presentations of it were, before the twentieth century, quite rare. Indeed, Islam began garnering attention from Christendom almost from its birth. The Muslims began conducting raids against Byzantium shortly after the Prophet’s death, and Spain was invaded less than one hundred years later. Both of these events made Islam a phenomenon Christianity could not ignore, but rarely did Christians view Islam with a sympathetic eye. To many mediaeval theologians, Muhammad was the “false prophet” and the “Anti-Christ.”[13] Dante describes Muhammad’s and ‘Ali’s sufferings in hell in terms almost unrivaled in their horror in the entire trilogy,[14] and Voltaire’s drama “Mahomet” makes Muhammad commit the most horrifying atrocities.[15] It wasn’t until the time of the Enlightenment that a few Europeans, most notably Thomas Carlyle, began to express respect for Islam and its founder.[16] Present-day Western attitudes about Islam, though perhaps not always sympathetic, are at least less frequently vituperative. For example, the Second Vatican Council, in its 1965 Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions, took pains to seek correspondences between Christianity and Islam and to express respect for the latter.[17]

1.4. WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP ON SHI’A ISLAM

The history of the study of Shi’a Islam within the spectrum of general Islamic studies is analogous to that of the study of comparative religion in the broader spectrum of the humanities.[18] That is, Shi’ism seems to have long suffered the fate of being written off as merely tangential to other, more relevant topics. In 1924, E. G. Browne lamented in the preface to volume IV of his A Literary History of Persia that there was an inaccessibility of primary sources and a lack of a concise catalogue of available Ithna ‘Ashari works.[19] The twentieth century has witnessed a gradual advance in the amount of attention paid to the study of Shi’ism and, though some scholars do still bemoan the paucity of good Western scholarship on the topic,[20] the topic in all fairness must be said to be increasingly well-examined.

Literature on Shi’ism was first disseminated in the nineteenth century. This consisted first of a few random lithographs, and then “an ever growing flood” of works.[21] These were published in the main centres of Twelver Shi’ism in Iran, and likely few made it into western hands. There was a brief flurry of excitement in the academic community when, in 1842, Garcin de Tassy published in the Journal Asiatique the text and translation of an “unknown chapter of the Qur’an.”[22] This “new” sura was republished the following year in the same journal, complete with verse numberings and vocalizations.[23] This excitement proved to be short-lived, though; discussions of these new suras garnered little attention and did little to further Orientalist interest in Shi’ism. It wasn’t until 1874 that the first real academic research in any Western language dedicated to Shi’ism was published, namely Ignaz Goldhizer’s studies Beiträge zur Literaturgeschichte der Shi’a und der sunnitischen Polemik (“Contributions to the History of Literature of the Shi’a and Sunni Polemics”),[24] followed in 1901 by an article by another German writer, Julius Wellhausen’s widely-discussed study of the Kharijites and the Shi’a entitled “The religio-political opposition parties in early Islam.”[25] The next notable addition to the corpus was E. G. Browne’s four-volume collection mentioned above, A Literary History of Persia, published between 1902 and 1924. Dwight M. Donaldson, a Christian missionary who spent sixteen years in Mashhad, Iran, produced the next major work in English. Though some Muslim scholars have maligned this text (Seyyed Hosain Nasr claimed that Donaldson was “particularly famous for [his] hatred of Islam”[26]), it quickly achieved the status of being considered the foremost authoritative textbook on Shi’ism, a place it held until quite recently.[27]

Between 1933 and 1979 there were only scattered publications on Shi’a Islam, most notably the highly-respected corpora of Henri Corbin and Louis Massignon, published mostly in the 1950s and 1960s. Then, in 1979, a political event occurred which was to have an unparalleled influence on the state of Islamic studies in the West. The Shah of Iran, whom many Muslims considered to be a puppet of Imperialism who was selling out the country, was overthrown and replaced by Ayatollah Khomeini and a more religiously-fundamentalist government. The revolution in Iran became a subject of immediate political concern in the West, and, as well, was the impetus for an unprecedented examination of Shi’ism by Western scholars. The vast majority of these studies have focused on political science and sociology, but there was nonetheless a corresponding resurgence in religious studies. Not only did this event make Shi’ism a household word, but it also gave Westerners a new appreciation of Shi’ism. Whereas before Shi’ism had usually been viewed as a small and relatively unimportant sect of Islam, it was now seen as a major influence in international affairs.

The new interest in Shi’a Islam prompted by the events of 1979 was not necessarily a positive one. Though Shi’ism was now a topic of major academic interest, this interest was often less than sympathetic, for the Iranian revolution tended only to confirm Westerners’ worst fears about Islam. In 1985, the renowned Islamicist Alessandro Bausani wrote that, though Khomeini was to be “thanked” for promoting awareness in Shi’ism, nonetheless presentations of Shi’ism were still “often ill-informed and
To conclude, academic attention to Shi'a Islam was sporadic at best until the 1950s. Then, works of certain scholars, most notably Corbin, began appearing which gave new inspiration to the study of Shi'ism. At present, there is a great deal of interest in the topic, largely due to the major recent political events in Iran. Some scholars fear that this new interest is not a healthy one, for they feel that Westerners may be getting a narrow view of Shi'a history distorted by contextual politics. This by no means represents a consensus in the academic community, though. Numerous high-quality, objective, and academically-responsible books and articles have been published in the past fifteen years, and the state of Shi'a studies in the West can fairly safely be said to be, if not thriving, at least active.

The sources I have used to interrogate Shi'a history are almost entirely from the above trajectory of twentieth-century Western scholarship, especially that written in English and French. This includes the only four full-length studies of Shi'a history done thus far: Donaldson's *The Shi'ite [sic] Religion*, Halm's *Shiism*, Mommen's *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, and a lengthy chapter in Farhad Daftary's *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrine*, entitled "Origins and early development of Shi'ism."[31] The only other full-length general introductions to Shi'ism, S. Husain M. Jafari's *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* and 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i's *Shi'ite Islam*, Halm describes as scholars writing in the guise of objective academia whose works should be considered as primary, not secondary, sources.[32] My reading of these two texts supports this assessment. Though scholarly and well-written, neither author distances himself enough from his personal religious affiliation to approach the history critically. The many other books I have found useful do not present general examinations of Shi'i history as do the above six works, but rather focus on general aspects of Islamic history. I must point out, in concluding, that no work in English has yet been produced which does comprehensively examine in a detailed and critical manner the origins of Shi'ism.

1.5. SUMMARY OF SHI'A ISLAM

The word "Shi'a" just means "party," as in "political party." This is a foreign term imposed on this branch by outside scholars; the Shi'is themselves most often refer to themselves as al-khassa, "the Select," or, more simply, al-ta'ifa, "the Group."[34] But, to define Shi'ism simply as a party of Islam would be seriously to demean its scope and import. Though this paper will concentrate only on the events that occurred up to 632 C.E., I will here briefly summarize the first few decades of Shi'a history for the sake of better locating this topic in its history. (For a fuller exposition of some of these events, see below, Part Two.)

The origins of Shi'a Islam are found, first, in statements the Prophet Muhammad made about 'Ali in his life and then in the issue of succession following Muhammad's death. There are a few indications that Muhammad may have intended for his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali ibn Abi Talib to succeed him as the leader of the Muslim community. Though a great many sayings of the Prophet were later invented by the Shi'is to support their claims,[35] there are nonetheless a few hadith (sayings of Muhammad) accepted as canonical by both main branches of Islam that point to some sort of unique status of 'Ali in Muhammad's eyes.

'Ali was only nine or eleven years old when he recognized the prophetic station of Muhammad. This places him, after Muhammad's wife Khadija, as being the first believer, followed by Abu Bakr and Zayd.[36] The next significant event is preserved by Tabari, the distinguished early Sunni historian. Tabari records that, three years after the beginning of Muhammad's prophetic mission, the Prophet called forty eminent guests to dinner and, in front of all, ordered the community to listen to and obey the boy 'Ali. During Muhammad's lifetime, 'Ali undertook a great many unique tasks, such as acting as his secretary in Medina, leading the battles of Badr and Khaybar as standard-bearer, and caring for Muhammad's family while he was on campaign. 'Ali was the only other adult male besides Muhammad who was allowed to come and go freely in the Prophet's house. The single most significant event, named eponymously after the place of its occurrence, is the Ghadir Khumm. Both Shi'a and Sunni sources record that on the way back from Mecca to Medina following Muhammad's final pilgrimage, he stopped the caravan at a pool called Ghadir Khumm. The Prophet called everyone's attention, stood up with 'Ali and raised 'Ali's hand, and clearly stated "Of whomsoever I am Lord (mawla), then 'Ali is also his Lord." While there is dispute as to the exact meaning of mawla in this context, the event at least is recognized by both main branches of Muslims to signify a unique importance of 'Ali in Muhammad's eyes.

Muhammad does not seem to have left his community with clear directions as to how to choose a successor. Shi'a hadiths recount that, lying on his deathbed, Muhammad asked for pen and paper with which to write his will and, supposedly, name 'Ali as successor. His request was refused, and he died without leaving any formal record of his wishes. The community was thus left with the responsibility of trying to figure out how to choose a leader, and there was no precedent for them to follow. Some thought that the successor should be chosen in the manner of the earlier tribal custom; this would entail that the members of the community would vote to select one of their own class, a person renowned for his qualities of strength and virtue (muruwwa). Others felt that only a member of Muhammad's immediate family, one who enjoyed blood-ties to the holy Prophet, could have the necessary divinely-appointed authority to rule. It is possible that some may have agitated for the installation of 'Ali, though it is not known how
announced that 'Ali was to be his successor. Many sources preserve accounts of the day when Muhammad stopped his caravan at a pool named Ghadir Khumm, where he declared 'Ali to be his successor: the Ghadir Khumm. Then I will examine the time that Muhammad more explicitly attempted officially to name 'Ali as his successor, namely the incident of the "pen and paper" when he tried to write his wishes.

Two years later, in 634 C.E., Abu Bakr nominated 'Umar to succeed him, and 'Ali gave 'Umar his pledge of fidelity. 'Umar, as he lay dying from an assassin's wound ten years later, appointed a six-member council to choose a successor. 'Ali was offered the caliphate on the condition that he continue the policies of his predecessors, which he refused to do, since what he was in effect being asked to do was to keep the Qurayshi tribe in power at the expense of other tribes. 'Uthman, the alternate choice, accepted the caliphate. Though 'Ali expressed a certain hesitation in offering 'Uthman his support, he made no vocal objections to 'Uthman's appointment. When 'Uthman was murdered in 656 C.E., 'Ali was urged to take the caliphate and, though expressing reluctance, he now accepted. Though discontent with his caliphate was not long in coming, it is possible that he was initially supported by all sides.

'Ali's accession to the caliphate came to be regarded by the later Shi'a as a long-overdue fulfillment of the Prophet's own wishes. Although certain significant events occurred during 'Ali's reign, such as the first civil war, his caliphate is highly regarded in the Shi'i tradition for other reasons, namely, that it was the first time that the Prophet's wishes were finally implemented. 'Ali was assassinated by a Khariji in 661 and his son Hasan declined to press his claims for the caliphate. Instead, Hasan ceded power to the Qurayshi aristocrat Mu'awiya, and thus the Umayyad period began, marking the end of the period of the "rightly-guided Califhs" in the eyes of the community. From this point, the Sunnis and the Shi'is recognized different leaders--the Sunnis continued to follow the Caliphs, but the Shi'is instead regarded the Imams, the offspring of 'Ali, as the true leaders, even though the Imams had no temporal power. Hasan was poisoned in 669, most likely at the instigation of Mu'awiya. He was followed by his brother Husayn, the third Imam. Mu'awiya died in 680 and partisans of 'Ali urged Husayn to travel to Iraq to lead a revolt against Mu'awiya's successor Yazid and seek the caliphate. Husayn set out with about seventy of his supporters, including his wives and children, but they were met by a contingent of Yazid's forces and surrounded at a place called Karbala. The men were killed and the women and children taken as slaves to Damascus. This event, though of a type relatively commonplace in Middle Eastern history, proved to have great ramifications. Julius Wellhausen expressed it well. He wrote that "Husayn's murder opened up a new era for the Shia... There are such things as events which have a tremendous effect, not so much through themselves and their inevitable consequences as through the memories they leave in the minds and hearts of men."

There were more Imams following Husayn--four for the Seveners, nine for the Twelvers, and differing numbers for the lesser sects--but none had the same impact on Shi'a history as did the Imamates of 'Ali, Hasan, and Husayn. The remaining history of early Shi'ism can be seen either as the later Shi'is see it--as a variety of factions splitting off from one clearly delineated succession of Imams--or as Orientalists see it--as a great number of often dissimilar groups forming and dissolving, sometimes even groups with no relation to each other, sharing little or nothing in common other than a belief that the progeny of Muhammad and/or his wives are the only rightful rulers.

Part Two: SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATIONS OF SOME EARLY EVENTS OF SHI'ISM

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Shi'i history records hundreds of significant events from the time of the Prophet indicating the future rule of the 'Alids. Indeed, the Shi'i scholar Ayatollah Lutfollah Saafi Golpayegani lists 2,002 hadiths that he asserts support the historical claims of the Twelvers, and in 91 of these hadiths Muhammad specifically declares 'Ali to be the first Imam. Of these numerous events, I have chosen to examine three in detail. I will look first at the most famous event, and one recorded by both Sunni and Shi'i sources, in which Muhammad allegedly declared 'Ali to be his successor: the Ghadir Khumm. Then I will examine the time that Muhammad more explicitly attempted officially to name 'Ali as his successor, namely the incident of the "pen and paper" when he tried to write his will. Finally, I will present the events surrounding the occasion to which, ultimately, the entire Shi'a-Sunni split can be traced, i.e., the happenings at the "Saqifa Banu Sa'ida."

2.2. THE GHADIR KHUMM

Many sources preserve accounts of the day when Muhammad stopped his caravan at a pool named Ghadir Khumm and announced that 'Ali was to be his mawla. First, a traditional Shi'i account of the day's events:

A mere three months before his death, in the month of Dhu'l-Hijja, Muhammad and as many as 124,000 of his followers were returning from Mecca to Medina following his final pilgrimage. He stopped the caravan at the Ghadir Khumm and ordered those who had gone on ahead to return, and waited for those behind to catch up, for he had something very important to say. He had received a new revelation from God. He climbed a pulpit which had been formed from stacked
camel saddles and, standing in the shade under two trees, addressed his followers with words of religious obligation, community responsibility, and the importance of his own family. "I was called and soon I will answer," he said. "My departure from amongst you is near. I am about to leave you with that which, if you ardently seize, you will never stray after my death: The Book of God and the people of my house. They are inseparable." Then he took 'Ali's hand and raised it high, such that all in the audience could clearly see his motions. Muhammad asked, "Who is the master of all believers?" The people replied, "God and his Prophet know." Then Muhammad uttered the famous words, "He of whom I am the master (mawla), of him 'Ali is also the master."[47] He repeated this sentence three or four times, and then said "Oh God, the one who is a friend of 'Ali, be his friend, and the one who is 'Ali's enemy, be his enemy."

Shi'is have no doubt whatsoever about the authenticity of this verse, largely because it is preserved in many of the classic Sunni collections of hadith, as well as Shi'a ones. Hassan al-Amin writes in the *Islamic Shi'ite Encyclopaedia* that "the authenticity of this story cannot be questioned," and cites as proof that "at-Tahari [sic] had written two volumes about it."[48] Tabataba'i refers to the event at Ghadir Khumm as "the central evidence of 'Ali's legitimacy as successor to the Prophet," and his editor Seyyed Hossein Nasr adds that this hadith is "one of the definitively established hadiths among Sunnis and Shi'ah," for "more than a hundred of the companions have recounted it with different chains of transmission and expressions."[49] Syed Abd-ul-Husain Sharafuddeen gives the most complete listing I've found in English of these hadith in *The Right Path*, volume I, pages 192-219. He also points out that Shi'a scholars of hadith list up to one hundred and five hadith in which the Ghadir Khumm is mentioned. And, of even more significance, the scholar Allama Zahabi, a Sunni, recorded eighty-nine hadiths, all passed through Sunni chains of transmission, which detailed the event.[50]

Further, Shi'is have no doubt about the meaning and import of this event. First, it occurred shortly before Muhammad's death, and he himself drew attention to this fact: "My departure from amongst you is near." This implies that his message would concern instructions about the event of his death or guidance for the times following it. Second, some Shi'i commentators propose that Muhammad, by explicitly calling everyone around to listen, including those who had gone ahead or those who lagged behind, may have intended, not just that all members of the caravan hear him, but also that it would be remembered by the most people. This care on the Prophet's part explains why the Ghadir Khumm is preserved, not just in so many collections of hadith, but also with a variety of isnads (chains of transmission).[51] Third, the Shi'is further emphasized its importance by institutionalizing remembrance of the Ghadir Khumm in a yearly festival, the 'Id al-Ghadir, which is held on the eighteenth day of the month of Dhu'il-Hijja.[52] This is considered the most holy of all Shi'i festivals, even more important than the tenth day of Muharram, which commemorates Husayn's martyrdom. Under Nasiru'd-Din Shah this event became a national holiday, and Sharafuddeen says that "hundreds of thousands of Shi'ahs" from all over the world "flock to the sacred shrines."[53] Indeed, he writes that

"Ever since the proclamation of Ghadeer by the messenger of Allah it has been the practice of... speakers and orators everywhere to address their coreligionists this day, narrating the circumstances of the proclamation, describing its effects and consequences... Similarly, their past and present poets have been composing poems commemorating the proclamation of Ghadeer."[54]

Though minor details vary between all of these accounts, all agree on the central statement "man kuntu mawlahu fa-'Ali mawlahu." The Shi'i do allow that the real meaning of mawla in this context cannot be ascertained with exactness—Haider Khan, editor of Sharafuddeen's correspondence, writes that it can be translated as master, lord, or guardian—but there is no doubt as to the general import of the word: all definitions convey the meaning of "one more deserving and of superior authority."[55] Yet not all Muslims accept this interpretation. Indeed, for the Sunnis to have preserved the hadith and considered it authentic, there is no doubt that they do not consider mawla to signify anything like "successor," though it is at first sight odd that they accept it so easily; "curieusement, les Sunnites ne paraissent pas contester" these statements, observes Daniel Gimaret.[56] Writes Shaikh Saleem al-Bashari, one-time head of Al-Azhar University and a Sunni, "Our belief that the Sahabas (companions) were on the right side, forces us to interpret the tradition of Ghadeer differently, no matter it has been consecutively transmitted or otherwise [sic]." As examples of other ways to interpret mawla, Shaikh Saleem cites the Qur'an 57:15, "hiya mawlakum," where he says mawla means "fit," Qur'an 19:5, "khiftu al-mawaliya," where mawaliya means "group," or "people," and other verses. Shaikh Saleem concludes by agreeing that, while Muhammad's statements at Ghadir Khumm do signify a distinguished place for 'Ali, they do not mean "successor," but "supporter," or "friend." The reason that the Prophet made this declaration was merely, Shaikh Saleem says, "in the nature of a will to the nation to have a particularly good regard for 'Ali for the sake of the Prophet."[57] Sharafuddeen's response—that Shaikh Saleem is overlooking the obviously great importance Muhammad attached to his announcement, as demonstrated by the observations listed above—is cogent but not, ultimately, provable.

There is, however, one aspect of this debate which, though Sharafuddeen neglects to mention it, is in the Shi'i favour. According to Hans Wehr's *Arabic-English Dictionary*, the word [ARABIC] has only the meanings Shaikh Saleem lists when it is indefinite. When definite, [ARABIC]. Wehr writes that it does mean "the Lord, God." In the phrase Muhammad uttered at the Ghadir Khumm, the word is contained in a construct, mawla-hu, "his mawla," which renders it grammatically definite. Thus, grammar upholds the claim that many Shi'is, even if not Sharafuddeen, advance: Muhammad here did declare 'Ali to be the Lord of the...
1966. The authenticity of Ghadir Khumm stands. Its interpretation, which is open to dispute, I will examine more thoroughly in both Sunni and Shi'i sources, including even Bukhari and at-Tabari. It is more likely that Eliash is misreading or misinterpreting the third most important text in Islam, following the Qur'an and, presumably, 'Ali's attributed a very important text, the Sahifah al-Kamilah al-Sajjadiyyah.

The significance of "Lord" can be determined. In summary, the Orientalists seem to have a fairly clear consensus on their estimation of the importance of the events at Ghadir Khumm. While some historians of Shi'ism, such as Momen in Shi'i Islam or Daftary in The Isma'iliis, only refer to the event in passing, most scholars recognize the event as being of central importance. For example, Donaldson in The Shi'ite Religion hardly mentions the other Shi'a proof texts, yet discusses the Ghadir Khumm for two full pages, and Joseph Eliash, in 'Ali b. Abi Talib in Ittha-`Ashari Shi'i Belief, not only devotes an entire chapter to a presentation of this event, but he doesn't even bother analyzing any of the others, such as the incidents of the "pen and paper," or the Saqifa Banu Sa'ida.[61] Even more telling, the first two editions of the Encyclopaedia of Islam include detailed and relatively lengthy discussions of the Ghadir Khumm, but make no mention, anywhere, of the "pen and paper" or the Saqifa Banu Sa'ida.[62]

Western scholarship, for the most part, upholds the Shi'i version of Ghadir Khumm. The main point with which Orientalist scholars disagree is the same as the point debated by the Sunnis; namely, that the word mawla does not necessarily have the clear significance as "master" and hence "successor" that the Shi'is claim it does. There is no disagreement about Muhammad actually using the term. For one thing, Gimaret points out "Noter cependant qu'en l'occurrence... les Imamites tirent argument de ce qu'aussitôt auparavant le Prophèt avait declare--recourant a un terme de la même racine WLY--être awla bi-l-muimin min afusihim,"[63] roughly, "the worthiest amongst the believers themselves." The statement to which Gimaret is referring Muhammad uttered four years before, on return from the expedition of Hudaybiyya. While some have speculated that the similarity of these two hadiths may indicate that there was only one event which the hadith scholars confused as two, the fact that both hadiths have been recorded with more than one isnad, and are each found in both Sunni and Shi'i sources, indicates that it is more likely that there were two distinct, though similar, utterances.[64] The relative certainty that Muhammad did, in fact, call 'Ali both mawla and awla leads the Orientalist scholars to agree, in toto, with Gimaret's conclusion about the man kuntu statement: "Cette phrase enigmatique," he writes, "...n'est pas contestee, quant a son authenticite." Rather, "ce qui est conteste, evidemment, est l'interpretation que les Imamites en donnent." That is, it is only the exact meaning of mawla and awla that is disputed, not the fact of their utterance.[65] This critique of the Western scholars does not differ significantly from that of the Sunnis. Thus, though Shi'is would respond (and have responded) that Orientalists have been influenced and hence misled by Sunni interpretations of history, the fact remains that, while the occurrence of the Ghadir Khumm is almost certain, there is no absolute certainty that Muhammad was actually declaring 'Ali to be his successor by these "enigmatique" statements; "Lord" could conceivably just indicate a place of honour.

In summary, the Encyclopaedia Islamica, with the most complete presentation of the Ghadir Khumm I've found in a Western source, writes that it is "certain that Muhammad did speak in this place and utter the famous sentence." Though Shi'is believe that this sentence effected an express appointment of 'Ali, Sunnis "consider that he was simply exhorting his hearers to hold his cousin and son-in-law ['Ali] in high esteem and affection."[66] Based on the above evidence alone, neither Muhammad's final intention nor the significance of "Lord" can be determined.

There is, however, one last insight that may cast a certain doubt on the Ghadir Khumm. To the fourth Imam, 'Ali Zayn al-`bidin, is attributed a very important text, al-Sahifah al-Kamilah al-Sajjadiyyah. Indeed, some educated Shi'is have considered this to be the third most important text in Islam, following the Qur'an and, presumably, 'Ali's Najj al-Balaghah.[67] This text, if the attribution is genuine and the text inspired, would have to be written during al-`bidin's imamate, circa 713-734 C.E. Eliash has discovered, after examining two different editions of this text, that it makes no mention of Ghadir Khumm. "Consequently," he writes, "the absence of any mention of Ghadir Khumm in the Sahifah necessarily casts doubt on the validity of the established Shi'i concept of Ghadir Khumm, to say nothing of its celebration before the days of the fourth Imam.[58] Coming from a text that is not only Shi'i, but was written by the Imam himself, this absence is doubly damaging. Not having read the Sahifah to which Eliash refers, though, I must point out that the balance of the evidence weighs against his doubt. One could postulate far more reasons for the absence of a mention of Ghadir Khumm in the Sahifah than one can explain away one of the most well-authenticated of all hadiths in both Sunni and Shi'i sources, including even Bukhari and at-Tabari. It is more likely that Eliash is misreading or misinterpreting the Sahifah than it is that over a millennium of often hostile Sunni research has failed to notice that which Eliash alone notices in 1966. The authenticity of Ghadir Khumm stands. Its interpretation, which is open to dispute, I will examine more thoroughly.
2.3. THE PEN AND PAPER

The crux of the Shi’i-Sunni split rests on the issue of designation. Sunnism, reflecting the belief that, according to a saying of the Prophet, “[t]he community will never agree on an error,”[70] derives legitimation of law and practice from community consensus, *ijma*.[71] Shi’ism, on the other hand, observes *nass*, literally “condition” or “arrangement.” *Nass* is the notion that the Prophet specifically designated ‘Ali as his successor, and, in later Shi’ism, that each Imam not only designates his successor but, before death, channels divine wisdom and even infallibility from himself to his successor.[72] As the Encyclopaedia of Islam summarizes, “The Shi’ites have never been able to understand, how the caliphate, which implied the quality of imam (the right to lead the Salat), could be conferred by election.”[73]

The event of the Ghadir Khumm clearly indicates that Muhammad recognized a distinct and significant place for ‘Ali in the community, for there are no records of him having made similar statements about others of the companions. However, his statements do not designate ‘Ali as successor in as clear a fashion as could be hoped, even by the Shi’is. This is more than simply a problem internal to Shi’i history and self-validation; anti-Shi’a factions of Islam have used the lack of apparent designation not just to dispute the facticity of Shi’ism’s origins but also as a weapon against all later developments of Shi’ism. Shahristani details how al-Nazzam, an early ninth-century Mu’tazilite philosopher, calls into question the soundness of Shi’ism’s claims to inherited legitimacy. al-Nazzam, he writes, “declare... qu’il n’est pas d’imamat sans designation express et nominale se deroulant de façon ouverte et publique.”[74] The Ghadir Khumm was not such an open and public designation—the Shi’is must claim legitimation on more than this. And they do. The incident in which, they believe, Muhammad did intend explicitly to confer the authority of ‘Ali by *nass* is the so-called “pen and paper” (also referred to occasionally as the “ink and paper”).

First, the (Sunni) account:

Narrated ‘Ubaidullah bin ‘Abdullah: Ibn ‘Abbas said, “When the ailment of the Prophet became worse, he said, ‘Bring for me (writing) paper and I will write for you a statement after which you will not go astray.’ But ‘Umar said, ‘The Prophet is seriously ill, and we have got Allah’s Book with us and that is sufficient for us.’ But the companions of the Prophet differed about this and there was a hue and cry. On that the Prophet said to them, ‘Go away (and leave me alone). It is not right that you should quarrel in front of me.’ Ibn ‘Abbas came out saying, “It was most unfortunate (a great disaster) that Allah's Apostle was prevented from writing that statement for them because of their disagreement and noise.”[75]

The tenth century Shi’i scholar Shaikh al-Mufid fleshes out the episode by reporting that, after hearing Muhammad’s request for pen and paper, ‘Umar ordered the man who had left to fetch them to “come back, [because] the Prophet is delirious.” The man complied.[76]

There is, of course, nothing that can be ascertained with certainty from a lack-of-a-statement. However, Shi’is believe it to be clear that Muhammad's intention was to inscribe the name of ‘Ali, or by some similar means to formalize the *nass*. Indeed, Sharafuddeen feels it to be so clear that he says: “That the Prophet... made a will in favour of Ali is a fact which cannot be denied with any stretch of the imagination.”[77] Some of the reasons for this certainty, explains his editor Khan, are that Muhammad cared too much for his wives and followers to leave them without a firm source of guidance, and that “it is against all reason that the Prophet... commanded all his adherents to make a will, but he himself did not make any will.”[78] The fourteenth century divine Hasan b. Yusuf b. ‘Ali b. al-Mutahhar al-Hilli argues the same point using logic. Either Muhammad appointed a successor, or he didn't, begins al-Hilli. The second option is false for two reasons. One, it is incumbent upon the Prophet of God to appoint a guardian for God's religion. Two, Muhammad's compassion was so great that he would not have left his community abandoned. Now, given that Muhammad did appoint a successor, al-Hilli points out that it surely would have been a choice between ‘Ali and Abu Bakr. The second option must be false, for Abu Bakr never mentioned having been appointed, and he even said that ‘Ali, not he, was the best man in the community. Hence, Muhammad appointed ‘Ali as his successor.[79] A final note in favor of the authenticity of the "pen and paper" event is that it is included in three of the most canonical, and Sunni, works in Islam: the Sahih of Bukhari, the Sahih of Muslim, and the *Tarikh* of at-Tabari.[80]

Of the three significant events I am focusing on, this is the most ambiguous and poorly documented. Momen describes it as a "highly controversial episode."[81] First, though, I must dispel an objection to the incident that immediately comes to mind. Muhammad was said to be illiterate. The Qur'an in two places declares Muhammad to be "unlettered" (ummi).[82] What need would an unlettered man, prophet or not, have with pen and paper? I think this is not an important objection for two reasons. One, "unlettered" need not mean completely incapable of writing. Simply to write Ali would surely have been in his power. Two, it is possible that he was not even wholly illiterate to begin with. "It is not very unlikely," claims Donaldson, "that Muhammad could write."[83]

There are, however, more serious objections to this report. First, and most simply, all we have is a report that the Prophet asked for
immediately after the meeting. Related to this is the second uncertainty. That is, there is not agreement on when 'Ali gave the proceedings. If this is the case, then the confrontation between 'Ali and 'Umar could have occurred a day or two later, instead of in the more caring and pious task of washing the Prophet's body, Sunni sources are not so clear that he wasn't involved in the

While most histories concur with the above, there are a few telling differences. While Shi'i and Sunni sources are in almost full agreement about the details of the Saqifa Banu Sa'ida, save the specific of whether or not 'Ali and/or his supporters were present (see below). Where they mainly differ is, not in the historical accounts of the event, but in interpreting the trends and attitudes surrounding the incident. In brief, when Muhammad died, his daughter Fatima, her husband, who was 'Ali, and the rest of the Prophet's family were busy preparing his body for burial. Unbeknownst to them, while they were thus occupied, there were two meetings happening elsewhere in the city. One group consisted of those Muslims who had made the original emigration from Mecca to Medina with Muhammad, the muhajirun, while the other, which was being held at the porch, or saqifa, of the Banu Sa'ida tribe, consisted of those Muslims who joined the religion after the hijra, the ansar. Abu Bakr and the other muhajirun either learned about this meeting or stumbled upon it by accident. What they discovered came as an unwelcome surprise. The ansar, probably worried about losing whatever status they had in the community (due to political reasons we need not address), were devising plans to preempt the process of appointing a successor to Muhammad by installing a native Medinan, Sa'd ibn 'Ubada, as head of the Muslim community. The muhajirun quickly hurried to the Saqifa Banu Sa'ida to be able to have their say before it was too late. Abu Bakr took the floor and, speaking diplomatically, named a variety of reasons why one of the muhajirun should be appointed successor. After a fair amount of debate, 'Umar came forward and openly shook Abu Bakr's hand, which was the clear and unmistakable sign for the oath of allegiance, bay'a. One by one, almost all present came forward and swore fealty to Abu Bakr. A few, however, didn't. Instead, they left the proceedings and went to 'Ali's house to tell him what had happened. When those remaining at the Saqifa heard that a crowd was gathering at 'Ali's home, they went to confront them and, presumably, to seek to secure 'Ali's bay'a. In this hope they were disappointed, for 'Ali refused to recognize Abu Bakr as leader. In fact, some accounts even report a brief fist- or sword-fight between 'Umar and 'Ali, which only the angry appearance of Fatima quelled. With Fatima's rebuff the crowd dispersed. Eventually, 'Ali did give in and swore allegiance to Abu Bakr.

While most histories concur with the above, there are a few telling differences. One, it is not certain that 'Ali was not a part of the proceedings. While Shi'i accounts tend to portray him as oblivious of plottings occurring behind his back, while he was engaged in the more caring and pious task of washing the Prophet's body, Sunni sources are not so clear that he wasn't involved in the proceedings. If this is the case, then the confrontation between 'Ali and 'Umar could have occurred a day or two later, instead of immediately after the meeting. Related to this is the second uncertainty. That is, there is not agreement on when 'Ali gave the
and many of those dissatisfied with Abu Bakr logically turned to 'Ali, the acknowledged leader, though "an ideal choice," in Hugh Kennedy's words, unconsciously, have been compared to his predecessor by the community. Since no one could replace the Prophet of God, Abu Bakr, such as the Kharijites, it is likely that 'Ali and his followers accepted Abu Bakr's leadership. This confused issue seems to be best settled by Watt's conclusion. Rather than explaining the community attitudes of the time by citing.

Western scholarship has not yet been able to mediate between these opposing presentations of the events of the Saqifa Banu Sa'ida. Orientalism has not analyzed the exact details of the proceedings in ways differing significantly from the partisan scholarship, for no new textual evidence has come to light. Instead, it has tended to focus more on general trends in the political climate, for this is an area open to continual reinterpretation. The issue which I will examine through the eyes of Occidental scholarship, then, is to what extent 'Ali had a personal following at this time, which in turn will provide clues as to whether or not contemporary members of the community had heard the same proofs supporting 'Ali's nomination by Muhammad that later Shi'i sources cite.

Mommen writes off such an investigation peremptorily: "It is impossible to assess," he says, "how strong the party that looked to 'Ali at this time was."[100] One thing that does seem to have been clear to all was that 'Ali held a special and esteemed place in the community. However, it is not so clear that, as Daftary claims, "a number of pious Muslims... zealously maintained that the succession to the Prophet was the legitimate right of 'Ali."[101] Indeed, Marshall Hodgson opines frankly that "it is hard to suppose that anyone thought of 'Ali as the logical candidate" at this time.[102] What seems most likely is that, while 'Ali certainly had personal support, there was not yet a shi'at 'Ali, there was no "party" proper. Montgomery Watt shares this opinion. He points out that, while there was a group of close friends and followers of 'Ali who did think of themselves as the shi'at 'Ali (though he doesn't specify, I think it clear from his text that he means after 632 C.E.), there is nonetheless nothing to suggest that this body of supporters thought of him as having any special charisma or unique claim to authoritative leadership.[103] That is, while there likely were some who had preferences that 'Ali lead the community, the notions of divinely-inspired and guided nass and of the usurpation of God's plans were quite likely later developments. There are a few clues that lead me to conclude this. First, if Muhammad's and by extension God's wishes were so clear, it is hard to comprehend how so many of the pious, devoted, and highly respected early believers, including not only 'Umar and Abu Bakr, but also Talha and Zubayr and even 'Isha'isha herself could have violated those wishes. Certainly, these of all people would be the ones most intimately familiar with and probably most respectful of Muhammad's intentions. Second, it seems possible that 'Ali did not harbour strong resentments. Shahristani may have written that some Shi'i sources regarded the companions of the Prophet with asperity (aprete), for, "seul, 'Umar aurait voulu tenir la chose secrète et faire prévaloir la candidature d'Abu Bakr au jour de la Saqifa,"[104] but Etan Kohlberg points out that many Shi'i sources still held positive attitudes towards the companions, and adds that we must not overlook significant details like the fact that 'Ali named one of his own sons 'Umar.[105] Thus, while there certainly were elements in early Islam that did condemn 'Umar and Abu Bakr, such as the Kharijites, it is likely that 'Ali and his followers accepted Abu Bakr's leadership.

This confused issue seems to be best settled by Watt's conclusion. Rather than explaining the community attitudes of the time by saying that there was no clear support for 'Ali on the one hand, or that there was a cohesive shi'at 'Ali on the other, Watt sees there as being, not a "movement" in support of 'Ali, but "rather a trend of thought, a frame of mind, or even a largely unconscious attitude."[106] I think it is indubitable that, following the death of the man who, not only was regarded as being the Prophet of God's Word, but was a highly charismatic and politically adept leader as well, the community would have been painfully aware of their lack of political and religious guidance. Certainly they would have been struggling to fill this lack, and the search for a new leader would have been an understandable reaction to Muhammad's death. Whatever new leader was chosen would naturally, even if unconsciously, have been compared to his predecessor by the community. Since no one could replace the Prophet of God, Abu Bakr, though "an ideal choice," in Hugh Kennedy's words,[107] could not help but suffer unfavorable comparisons. The disaffected and many of those dissatisfied with Abu Bakr logically turned to 'Ali, the acknowledged mawla of Muhammad, in seeking an...
improvement. This general sentiment could perhaps account for the "vague and [in]determinate... trend of thought"[108] that Watt sees as the nascent and as-yet inchoate "movement" that, by the first civil war, would grow into the party of 'Ali.

There are a few issues surrounding the Saqifa Banu Sa'ida that neither the millennium-old Shi'i-Sunni polemic nor the recent investigations by Occidental scholars have been able to agree upon. Namely, whether 'Ali and/or some of his supporters were at the meetings, whether they advanced a claim for 'Ali's leadership at this time, and what 'Ali's reaction to the outcome of the meeting was. One thing, though, can be postulated--it seems clear that an injustice was done to 'Ali. The events of the Ghadir Khumm were familiar to all. It was evident that Muhammad held 'Ali in at least a high esteem, for every meaning of mawla connotes, if not necessarily ruling authority, then at least a certain intimacy, as in "friend" or "companion."[109] And if merely the latter, 'Ali still held a place of unique eminence in Muhammad's eyes. There were, after all, numerous Companions (sahaba) of the Prophet, all of whom presumably would be his companions (mawla). Yet Muhammad is not said to have made similar statements about the other companions; just 'Ali. Thus, even those in the community who did not recognize 'Ali as their Lord (al-mawla) had to have been aware that he was a personage of significance. That being the case, it is notable that 'Ali was not given more of a say in the proceedings at the Saqifa Banu Sa'ida. Even if he had been there and his claims had been advanced, the existence of contrary reports renders it probable that his input had been limited. This is not mere speculation. Not only were Abu Bakr and 'Umar reported as saying that Abu Bakr's election was a slip.[110] but it has also been reported by the meticulous and reliable ninth century historian al-Baladhuri that, in retrospect, 'Umar admitted the whole affair to have been a falla, which Momen defines as "an affair concluded in haste and without reflection."[111] I thus think it safe to conclude partially in favour of the Shi'a view of these events: 'Ali was likely not granted as full a participation in the proceedings as he deserved, and Abu Bakr's leadership was not fully accepted by all. The Sunni claim that 'Ali was present and had no objections and fully supported Abu Bakr is doubtful.

2.5. CONCLUSIONS

In the above pages I have sought to examine as fully as possible, without diving into the original texts, the historicity of three foundational events for Shi'ism. First, Shi'is claim that Muhammad designated 'Ali as his successor on the day of the Ghadir Khumm, while Sunnis declare Muhammad's speech to indicate nothing more than a recognition of 'Ali's high standing in the community and a wish that he continue to be honoured after Muhammad's death. Two, Shi'is believe that Muhammad tried to formalize his selection by writing a will naming 'Ali, but Sunnis deny that the event occurred. Three, Shi'is assert that 'Ali was unjustly overlooked at the election process of the Saqifa Banu Sa'ida, presumably because the muhajirun knew that their only chance to grab and usurp power would be by circumventing Muhammad's planned transfer of leadership and doing so in a less than fully open and public manner. Sunnis instead aver that 'Ali was present, accepted Abu Bakr as leader, and gave him the oath of bay'a. Through my comprehensive examination I have concluded the following. While no conclusions can be stated with certainty, it seems to me most likely that: 1) Muhammad did, in fact, proclaim a unique and especial status for 'Ali, which is most soundly evidenced by the Ghadir Khumm. The best translation of this station is "Lord," a status clearly higher than simple "companion." 2) The evidence for the "pen and paper" is too fragile to use it as a justification for Shi'ism's claims. 3) The proceedings of the Saqifa Banu Sa'ida seem to have been conducted in haste and secretly, which likely had the purpose, and certainly had the effect, of excluding certain claimants for power, most notably the family of 'Ali.

Though crude (and amusing), it might be clearest to summarize by expressing my findings on the Shi'a-Sunni debate as a score:

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<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Shi'i</th>
<th>Sunni</th>
<th>My Conclusion</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ghadir Khumm</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>'Ali</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pen and paper</td>
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<td>'Ali</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saqifa Banu Sa'ida</td>
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Part Three: SHI'I HISTORIOGRAPHY

3.1. INITIAL QUESTIONS

I have analyzed exhaustively the Orientalist scholarship available to me that relates to these three key events in Shi'a history, and have weighed it against the Shi'i versions of history as contained in a few publications of Shi'i scholarship. My conclusions are that most (or, as analysed above, \( \frac{2}{3} \)) of the claims Shi'iism makes about its foundational events are validated by critical historical analysis. Though we cannot declare Shi'iism's view of history to be infallible, neither can we declare the oppositional history of the Sunnis to be entirely correct. Yet neither have we reached the aporia which, at the beginning of this examination, I forewarned was possible. That is, even though no final judgements can be made, even though the Shi'i/Sunni debate about historical facticity can not be decisively adjudicated, neither are we left in a state of analytical limbo. Conclusions can be drawn.
Chief among these conclusions are two: One, Muhammad clearly designated a place of uniqueness and some sort of authority for 'Ali, a designation which was not fully honoured and perhaps was not even explored by the community following Muhammad's death. Two, though an injustice does seem to have been done to the Shi'as, this does not fully validate their claims. The origins of Shi'ism are not nearly as unambiguous as Shi'i texts would have us believe, and the claim that 'Ali and the Imams are unquestionably the legitimate successors of the Prophet is not manifestly supported by the historical evidence. We are thus left with some questions that must be addressed before this investigation is closed. Are the Shi'is aware that their claims of authority are not unimpeachable? Do they realize that the historical evidence does not automatically accord with their presentations of history? Did they manipulate evidence to legitimate their claims, or do they sincerely and genuinely believe their interpretation of history to be patently correct and the Sunni detractors to be simply, though fully, mistaken? If some of the historical events of Shi'ism are found to have occurred otherwise than as presented by Shi'is, then are we to discard these claims and rewrite this history?

3.2. SHI'I HISTORY: REMEMBERED, RECOVERED, OR INVENTED?

Bernard Lewis has drawn a typology of the development of histories which can fruitfully address the above questions. He has subdivided the ways in which autonomous communities, especially ones organized around a religious commonality, have preserved and developed historiography into three main divisions: remembered history, recovered history, and invented history. Remembered history, writes Lewis, consists of statements about the past, "rather than history in the strict sense." It is the collective memory of a community. Examples are that the Americans view the Fourth of July and the French view July 14 to be dates on which dramatic historical events occurred, and both cultures have built elaborate celebratory themes around these dates. In actuality, relatively little happened on these specific dates; they merely serve as a focus for collective cultural mythology. Recovered history is the history of events, people, and movements that have been forgotten or rejected by the communal memory and then, later, recovered through academic scholarship. As an example I suggest the comparatively recent knowledge of Egyptian culture by virtue of finding the Rosetta Stone and our subsequent new abilities to decipher these ancient writings and thereby "discover" ancient Egypt. While such scholarship often is able to reconstruct ancient or even recent events through finding new evidence or new analytical tools, a certain degree of interpretation always comes into play. This is most pronounced in invented history, which is history created or modified for a purpose, history designed to fit an agenda. Invented history can consist of either slight, yet intentional, modifications to historical accounts, or actual rewriting. I think the most obvious example of this in modern times is the peculiar brand of revisionism known as "holocaust denial," where a great body of evidence is deliberately, even if perhaps unconsciously, manipulated not just to portray events in a new light but even to create whole new fictitious chapters of history. All three of these divisions can be found in varying degrees in every religious, cultural, or political community.

At first sight, it would seem that Western scholarship is almost unanimous in its appraisal of Shi'i presentations of history--scholarship discards it as highly unreliable and even at times fictitious. I'll cite a few examples to exemplify this consensus and, more important, to set the stage and provide a counterweight for my concluding observations. Momen: One problem that has beset the study of Shi'ism is the problem of the historicity of the sources... Modern historians have rejected much of the picture that the Muslim historical works attempt to create... This picture is thought by modern scholars to have been retrospectively imposed on the facts of the history of the early period... for doctrinal reasons. Lewis: "There has been a great controversy in recent years about whether early Islamic historiography is really historiography and whether the events recorded in these historical writings ever happened."

Watt: "Shi'ite propagandists from the later ninth century onwards presented a version of events... which supported their doctrinal and political views, but which is now held by occidental scholars to be at variance with what actually happened." Watt, again: "Shi'i apologists made assertions about early events which critical history cannot accept as true... it is an important historical fact that such assertions were made and widely believed. Wilfred Cantwell Smith: "The Arab writing of history has been functioning... less as a genuine inquiry than as a psychological defence" designed to fulfill "emotional needs."

Though I have only cited five quotations, they exemplify well the almost unanimous opinion of Orientalism. In terms of the above typology of historiography, this opinion seems best to fit the third--Shi'i history is invented. My close examination of the scholarship available leaves me disinclined to agree with this assessment. I would rather summarize Shi'i history by describing it as a "remembered" history with a high degree of selective interpretation. I see it as a history that, wherever primary sources allow for arbitrary interpretations of events or where primary sources are simply lacking, has glossed over inconsistencies or stretched interpretations of ambiguous events for the purpose of creating a coherent and cohesive historical trajectory. While this tendency is universal amongst religious communities, a few elements of Islamic history make the trend particularly noticeable in Shi'ism. One, the primary sources are neither numerous enough nor specific enough to allow for unambiguous interpretations. (E.g., what was a mawla, did Muhammad try to write a will naming 'Ali, and did 'Ali object to Abu Bakr's nomination or uphold it?) Two, Shi'i history has been concerned chiefly with a struggle for legitimating authority, and not just political authority, but authority conferred by God himself. This fight for legitimacy has been the central and motivational theme of all Shi'i history. Three, the Shi'i fight for legitimacy was not done in the abstract, but was always pitted against a very real opposition, namely the incompatible claims of authority by...
There is, as I mentioned, somewhat of an etymological and philosophical affinity between "fact" and "fiction." Now I must clarify this. The "modern" Western world has in this century begun examining with a highly critical eye the interrelations of rationality and subjectivity. One of its findings has been that the relationship between the "signifier" and the "signified" is much more tenuous than thinkers from Aristotle through to Descartes would have liked to have believed. The objective world is in a very real way the creation of the linguistic subject.[119] Postmodern thinkers have been quick to embrace this and related concepts, often to buttress deconstructionist or post-structuralist agendas. History is one discipline whose validity is most impugned. I will use Mark Taylor, a self-described postmodernist, as spokesperson for postmodern attitudes towards history. He observes that history "is a relatively recent invention."[120] As regards critical history, this is true. Taylor then goes on to undermine its factual objectivity. "Thereis more 'imagination' and 'fairy tale' in history than most people are willing to acknowledge," he declares. In fact, history is "the work of creative imagination."[121] This appears to be an assertion that history is fiction. However, he follows this by stating that "to say that history is an 'imaginative construction' is not to imply that it is 'unreal.'" Yet neither would Taylor be satisfied by calling history a factual endeavor. His point is that writing off history as fiction or certifying history's findings as fact would both be facile. "The careful examination of history subverts the sharp distinction between historical fact and fiction."[122] It is with the aid of this postmodernist historiographical methodology that I will judge the accuracy or fictiveness of Shi'i history.

There are some elements of Shi'i history that are clearly and indisputably later additions to and forced moldings of history. For example, the largest branch of Shi'ism believes that Muhammad was followed by twelve divinely guided Imams, and this is such a central tenet that this branch of Shi'ism is known as the Ithna 'Ashariyya, or "Twelvers."[123] However, aside from a few statements the Prophet made about the number twelve, there was no indication during the first eleven imamates that the line would end, and, moreover, there was not always even a certainty whether there was an Imam or who among competing claimants should be regarded as such; hence "twelver" is a later interpolation. As events unfolded over the course of a millennium, Shi'is understandably found it crucial to portray the diversity of events as elements in a continuum of linear development. It was necessary, for example, to ground the disappearance of the twelfth Imam in prophecies made by the Prophet that there would only be twelve Imams for, if even one aspect of the tradition was shown to be unplanned and unpredictable, then ultimately the authenticity of the entire tradition would be undermined. Just as I know that I must write this paper in a coherent way--each paragraph must logically follow the previous one and the entire paper must reflect the development and exposition of clearly-defined themes, else the reliability of the entire paper and my accountability as a scholar will be weakened--so must the variety and ambiguity of random events in history be interpreted to make them fit neatly into a coherent trajectory of historical development.

It is not the nature of history that requires selective preservation and interpretation of events, of course, but rather a community's self-definition. Like all religions, Shi'ism sees itself as a unique and well-defined community sharing common goals. As such, it must also have a well-defined common history. This explains why Shi'ism has been very concerned with presenting its history as coherent and systematized, and has been quite vigorous in defending its tradition. The power of history to reflect a community's self-image[124] and to codify and make coherent the historical trajectory that has produced the community does render its validity suspect. If history can be such a powerful tool when applied selectively, one is inclined to wonder just how judiciously the Shi'is have applied it; must Western scholarship reject the Shi'i historical tradition in toto? I think the answer is no, and this is where the insights of a "postmodern" methodology enter.

Statements such as Taylor's that history is an arena where fact and fiction commingle must be used with caution. If embraced ingenuously, real violence can be done to history. One could not unquestioningly validate Shi'ism's version of, say, the incident of the "pen and paper" without also validating the holocaust revisionism of David Irving and Robert Faurisson. One must tread with care to keep historiographical deconstruction from degenerating into mere historical solipsism. Nonetheless, an awareness of the degree to which interpretation colours our understanding of history offers insights which can give sanction to a great deal of "remembered" and, to a small extent, even to "invented" history.

3.3 CONCLUSIONS

With these factors in mind, I can offer my verdict on Shi'i historiography as reached through examining the above three key events.

1) Shi'ism has not necessarily invented the events which found its authority. Though a few incidents are poorly documented and perhaps did not occur at all, there are enough events that are sufficiently well-documented to validate its position.

2) Shi'ism has clearly remembered its history in a selective way. Where episodes are of ambiguous meaning, such as the intended significance of mawla or that the trajectory of the imamate was prophesied by Muhammad to consist of twelve Imamsthe Shi'is have retrospectively applied later definitions of what they believe Shi'ism to be. This was surely not a conscious distortion, though. Lewis points out that every generation of a religious community will have a slightly different view of its character and background. So, as each generation writes its histories, these temporally contextual self-images naturally will affect the presentation of history.[125] As Momen summarizes, "works that purport to examine the history or teachings of an earlier period are in reality more
a reflection of the period in which they were written than true expositions of that earlier period. However, I believe that, while this approach to history certainly will produce less accurate results than will analytical and unbiased critical scholarship, it remains an understandable and excusable aspect of any community's self-defined tradition.

3) The above criticisms of Shi'i historiography are in no way to be seen as critical of Shi'ism. Each and every observation can be applied, with equal validity, to the historiography of, not just Shi'ism's opponents the Sunnis, but to every autonomous religious, political, or cultural community. Thus, the fact that the historical findings of Orientalism often differ from the perceived history of Shi'ism does not thereby repudiate Shi'a Islam. Its history serves a vital role for the community. Researches such as this are, or should be, undertaken merely for the sake of arriving at better understandings of historical events and processes for those who wish to know, not to deny Shi'ism its memories and traditions.

4) Finally, though in saying this I approach the dangerous slopes of historical solipsism, the above observations on the nature of historical scholarship apply, not just to Sunnis equally as well as to Shi'is, but to the project of occidental analytical scholarship as well. That is, though critical analysis has much better methodologies at its disposal and far fewer preconceptions and agendas hindering it, nonetheless it remains vulnerable to the same criticisms it applies to the objects of its study. It remains susceptible to unconscious biases and faulty sources. This latter point has been made quite often by Shi'is themselves. Where we western scholars challenge the history of Shi'ism, it is possible that we have sometimes fallen prey to the disinformation campaigns of the heresiographers. Indeed, some western scholars themselves have frankly acknowledged this; Hodgson himself sees that "Islamists, both Muslim and Western, have had a way of absorbing the point of view of orthodox Islam," by which he certainly means the point of view of the Sunnis. Thus, when Shi'is declare our sources to be as fallible as we sometimes reject theirs as being, ultimately we have no definitive way of weighing which historiography is least defective.

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Notes


2 A few terms should be introduced here for the benefit of the reader with little familiarity with Arabic. Shi'a is the (uninflected) noun, Shi'i is the (nisba) adjective, and Shi'ism is the English term for the whole of this branch of Islam. In places these terms are somewhat interchangeable, and I chose arbitrarily. Also, I have used the phrase "Shi'a studies" though perhaps it is not always the most felicitous. It is meant to signify studies on Shi'ism, not necessarily studies by Shi'is. Where necessary I will be more explicit in distinguishing between the two.

As another note, the variance between the diacritical system used in the footnotes and in the body of the text was unavoidable.


6 I will use the terms Shi'ism and Sunnism throughout this paper, but this is simply out of convenience. Speaking objectively, neither the term Shi'ism nor Sunnism can really be applied until at least the third century A.H.; the only proper way to refer to the future Shi'is is with the term 'Alids, "followers of 'Ali." This, of course, is precisely the issue I am examining, for Shi'is claim that their party can be traced back to the time of the Prophet himself.

7 Momen, Shi'i Islam, p. 23.


9 "Fiction" is from Latin fictio, from fictus, past participle of fingere, to form, which, though a different word from facère, has a similar meaning.

10 Cf. below, p. 5 and pp. 7f.


14 Cf. Inferno, Canto 28, vs. 10-12.


18 Though I do not quote from it here, I would like to point out to the reader the most complete survey of this topic available. It is Etan Kohlberg’s “Western Studies of Shi’a Islam,” in Martin Kramer, ed., *Shi’ism, Resistance, and Revolution* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 31-46, also found under the same title in *Belief and Law in Imami Shi’ism* (Hampshire, U.K.: Variorum, 1991), article II.


23 Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide*, p. 80. Though it was initially suspected to be a Shi’i sura, this has been disproved. See my “The Shi’i Qur’an: An Examination of Western Scholarship,” (Unpublished paper, The University of Toronto, 1995), pp. 15-19.


27 Halm considers Momen’s *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam* to have surpassed Donaldson’s in usefulness. (Halm, *Shiism*, p. 3).


35 See my “The Shi’i Qur’an.”

36 Some sources name both ‘Ali and Abu Bakr as being first; Momen reconciles the discrepancy by pointing out that what is likely meant is that, while ‘Ali was first believer, Abu Bakr was the first adult to follow Muhammad. Momen, *Shi’i Islam*, p. 325, note 2.

37 Donaldson claims that it appears that ‘Ali seriously considered pressing his claims even at this early stage, (Donaldson, *The Shi’ite Religion*, p. 12) but Momen counters that, though ‘Ali was urged to do so, he refused. (Momen*Shi’i Islam*, p. 18).


40 Momen, Shi'i Islam, p. 22. It must be pointed out that some scholars disagree with this statement. Cf. Halm Shiism, p. 8: "Ali's Caliphate was disputed from the very beginning."

41 Halm, Shiism, p. 8.

42 Momen, Shi'i Islam, p. 28.

43 Quoted in Halm, Shiism, p. 15.

44ayatollah lutfollah saafi golpayegani, "A reply to 'belief of mhdism in shia imamia': A response to sachedina's Islamic Messianism," trans. dr. hasan najafi and ed. k. najafi. (toronto: i.h.a., no impress date), p. 17.

45 wehr gives, as possible meanings for ghadir, pond, pool, puddle; stream, brook, creek, river. hans wehr, Arabic-English Dictionary (ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, 1976), s.v. ghadir.


47 [arabic]


49 Tabataba'i, Shi'ite Islam, p. 40, and p. 68, note 7, respectively.


52 Though al-Amini writes that the Ghadir Khumm did occur on 18 Dhu'l-Hijja (Eliash, 'Ali b. Abi Talib, p. 144), it is probable that this date was chosen, not because it is certain that the event occurred on this day, but because some Shi'i scholars concluded that it was most probably on this day that 'Ali succeeded 'Uthman to the caliphate. Eliash, ibid., p. 135, note 3.

53 The festival was first institutionalized by Mu'izzu'd-Dawla in Baghdad in 962. interestingly, the Sunnis promptly retaliated by creating festivals of their own, namely in commemoration of Abu Bakr's stay in the cave and the death of Mus'ab ibn al-Zubayr, the defector of Mukhtar. Cf. Eliash, 'Ali b. Abi Talib, pp. 137ff., note 7, and Momen, Shi'i Islam, p. 82, note.


55 Khan, The Right Path, vol. I, p. 194, note 2. Wehr adds that mawla can also mean protector, patron; client; charge; friend; companion, associate. With the definite article, al-mawla, it can also signify Lord or God. Wehr, Arabic-English Dictionary, s.v. maulan. (Cf. note 58.) This term has had a number of different technical meanings specific to different periods of Islamic history, but, since these other meanings apply to events after 632, they are not relevant here.

56 Gimaret, trans. Shahristani's Livre des religions, p. 479, note 16. I translate "Curiously, the Sunnis don't seem to dispute" this phrase.


58 Cf. above, note 55. This point needs to be clarified. Wehr's is the only dictionary that explicitly lists this meaning of mawla. J. G. hava's Arabic-English Dictionary, s.v. [ARABIC], lists only "lord, master," both lower case; E. W. lane's Arabic-English Lexicon, s.v. [ARABIC], first lists "synonym of [ARABIC]," and follows it with the English meanings "a lord or chief," again lower case; and Munir Ba'albaki's Modern English-Arabic Dictionary, s.v. "lord," lists as translations first sayyid and second mawla. Thus, Wehr is alone in explicitly stating that al-mawla means "the Lord, God," in upper case, and hence it must be pointed out that he could be incorrect. However, I think it more likely that he is correct, and that the other three dictionaries merely fail to mention said meaning. I draw this conclusion from the fact that al-sayyid is one of the ninety-nine names of Muhammad, and mawla, as a derivative of the name of
God al-waliyyu, also indicates a divine meaning. Hence, I believe "the Lord, God" to be an accurate translation of al-mawla.

59 A common Sufi interpretation is that 'Ali's Lordship is spiritual, not political. While this interpretation is possible and valid, it is a speculation which the meanings of mawla do not necessarily justify.

60 The most extensive collection of Shi'i scholarship done to date is by Mujtahid Ayatu'llah 'Abd al-Husayn al-Amini al-Najafi, entitled [ARABIC], which I translate The (Event of) Ghadir in the Book, Tradition, and Literature. This work comprises a full eleven volumes, totaling several thousand pages.


63 Gimaret, trans. Shahrustani's Livre des religions, p. 479, note 16. I translate: "Note, however, that in this occurrence [of the Ghadir Khumm] the Imamis draw their argument from that which the Prophet had declared immediately prior--resorting to a term with the same root of WLY [ARABIC], the root of both mawla and awla] to be the worthiest of all the believers."


65 Gimaret, trans. Shahrustani's Livre des religions, p. 479, note 16. I translate: "The authenticity of this enigmatic phrase isn't contested. That which is contested, evidently, is the interpretation that the Imamis have given it."


69 See section 3.2, below.


71 Literally "agreement," form IV masdar, from form I, "to gather."


74 Muhammad Ben 'Abd al-Karîm Shahrustâni, Les dissidences de l'islam, trans. Jean-Claude Vade (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner S.A., 1984), p. 146. I translate "[al-Nazzam] declare[d] that there is no such thing as the imamate without an express and clearly-appointed designation displayed in an open and public fashion." (I am using this statement of Shahrustani's without implying thereby that al-Nazzam was either pro- or anti-Shi'a. Though Shahrustani claims that al-Nazzam had "tendences pro-radiites," Gimaret demonstrates that "l'attribution à [Nazzam] des positions imamites traditionelles (la designation de l'imam par nass et ta'yin, et que'Ali a fait l'objet d'un nass zahir...) paraît être une pure invention de [Shahrustani]."

75 The following account is taken from al-Bukhari's "genuine" (sahih) collection of hadiths, accessed from the Internet (Linkname: Hadith Bukhari (English Translation); URL: http://www.isnet.org/cgi-bin/hadith/bukhari), trans. and ed. anonymous, Volume 1, Book 3, Number 114.

76 Quoted in al-Amin, Islamic Shi'ite Encyclopedia, vol. 1, p. 254.


Quoted in Eliash, 'Ali b. Abi Talib, p. 84ff.

See Tabataba'i, Shi'i Islam, page 69, note 11, for more, and full, references.

Momen, Shi'i Islam, p. 15.


Donaldson, The Shi'ite Religion, p. 46.


Eliash quotes from Rodwell's interpretation, citing it as verse 5:60, and he only mentions that part of the verse cited above. (Eliash, 'Ali b. Abi Talib, p. 21). This is unfortunate. First, he uses a translation with nonstandard numbering. The standard Cairene redaction numbers this as verses 5:55-56. Two, he leaves off the most important segment. The Qur'an continues "... As to those who turn to Allah, His Messenger, and the believers,--it is the party of Allah that must certainly triumph." (5:56, revised Yusuf Ali translation) The key term here for Shi'is is [ARABIC], "party" of God, which they interpret to be a clear prefigurement of the shi'at 'Ali, "party" of 'Ali.

Comment on Sahih Bukhari, Volume 1, Book 3, Number 114. (See note 75.) The author of this statement says nothing more than this, and so I do not understand clearly what exactly his or her point is.

The following account is culled from Momen, Shi'i Islam, pp. 18ff.; Donaldson, The Shi'ite Religion, pp. 10-13; and al-Amin, Islamic Shi'ite Encyclopedia, vol. 3, pp. 42-45.

Though I only mention the muhajirun and the ansar, there was actually a number of competing claimant groups. al-Amin describes five of these. Cf. al-Amin, Islamic Shi'ite Encyclopedia, vol. 3, pp. 42-43.

S. Husain M. Jafri, Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam (Librairie du Liban, London, 1979), pp. 37-57, presents a full review of the facts of the event as well as a discussion of various reportages of it. In sum, he finds that, but for minor details, all accounts of the event agree. Cf. also Momen, Shi'i Islam, p. 18.

Momen, Shi'i Islam, p. 20.


al-Amin, Islamic Shi'ite Encyclopedia, vol. 3, p. 44.


Quoted in Donaldson, The Shi'ite Religion, p. 12.


Momen, Shi'i Islam, pp. 19f.

Daftary, The Isma'ili, p. 37.

103 Montgomery W. Watt, The Majesty that was Islam (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1974), p. 68. The Encyclopaedia Islamica expresses a clearly-defined opinion on this: “There was... a Shi’at ‘Ali... at the very latest immediately after the death of the Prophet.” Encyclopaedia Islamica, 2nd. ed., s.v. “Shi’a,” p. 350.

104 Shahrastani, in Vadet, trans. Shahrastâni’s, Les dissidences de l’islam, p. 146. I translate “Alone, ‘Umar had wanted to keep things secret in order to make Abu Bakr’s candidacy prevail on the day of the Saqifa.” The reader may wonder why I am using three different translations of Shahrastani. I do not have the original available to me, and have to juggle the translations to find the most appropriate quotes to fit my context.


107 Kennedy, The Prophet, p. 52.


109 See above, note. 55.

110 See above, p. 28.

111 Momen, Shi‘i Islam, p. 199.

112 This typology and the following exposition of it is drawn from Lewis, History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented, pp. 11ff.

113 Lewis, History, p. 50.

114 Momen, Shi‘i Islam, pp. 61ff.


116 Watt, The Majesty that was Islam, p. 66.


118 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Islam in Modern History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 120.

119 Cf. any study of linguistic theory from the death of Ferdinand Saussure (1857-1913) to the present.


121 Taylor, Erring, p. 66. Italics in original.

122 Taylor, Erring, p. 67.

123 See above, p. 9.


126 Momen, Shi‘i Islam, p. 61.

127 Hodgson, “How did the Early Shi‘a Become Sectarian?,” p. 5.
The various aspects of Twelver Shi‘ism are carefully distinguished to satisfy both the general reader and the aspiring student.”—Norman Calder, Times Literary Supplement. “Specialist and nonspecialist alike will benefit from its lucid exposition of both elite and popular Shi‘ism. Especially valuable is the way the work presents modern critical scholarship on Shi‘i history alongside the orthodox history, which still has great influence on the religion’s self-understanding.”—Mel Piehl, Library Journal. A good, thorough introduction to the history, doctrines and popular practice of Shi‘i Islam (specifically Twelver Shi‘ism, the most widely held school, though the origins of the other schools are mentioned).