Imam al-Baqir and the Doctrine of Imamate

A Reading Guide To

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

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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 at

contributions are situated within the religious, social, political and intellectual milieu of the time. Particular

length the distinguishing features of Imam al-Baqir's claim

Imam from this line created several branches within the Kaysaniyya. An important

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 3.71q(p)1(e(ere2 Tkt esnB-tatninetat2nowledge or8)TJ/T

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 tran