

## Introduction

While it cannot be denied that within recent years there has been a considerable increase in our general knowledge regarding Islam, it must also be admitted that not any appreciable advance has been made in our knowledge of Shi'ite history, philosophy and law.

Curiously enough researches of considerable significance have been made regarding Ismailism (a small fraction of the Shia) and the works of L. Massignon, W. Ivanow and P. Kraus, in particular, have opened up new vistas and indicated new lines of advance. But with regard to the most important and numerous group of the Shia, the Ithna Ashariya, the position has remained more or less stationary.

Isr. Friedlaender<sup>1</sup>, writing in 1907, complains of the paucity of our knowledge in this respect, and he says that Shi'ism is known to us in the roughest outline<sup>2</sup>, and the religious tendencies are not known at all. One of the difficulties according to him is its heterogeneous character; for it is not easy to analyze its peculiar component parts, drawn as they are from such widely divergent sources as Babylonian, Persian, Jewish and Muslim.<sup>3</sup> Professor E. G. Browne, writing in 1924, deplores the lack of our knowledge, particularly in regard to the Shi'ite creed, and he advocates a comparative study.<sup>4</sup>

Later, discussing the *Haqqu 1-Yaqin* of Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, a very important theological work, composed in 1109/1698 and printed in Tehran in 1241/1825, he regrets the lack of leisure which prevented him from completing its French rendering begun by the late M. A. de Biberstein Kazimirski; and he further adds that the importance of it would be great "since we still possess no comprehensive and authoritative statement of Shi'a doctrine in any European language".<sup>5</sup>

Still later, in 1934, R. Strothmann, writing in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, while giving a brief account of the Shi'a<sup>6</sup>, laconically remarks that "there is no thorough account of the Shi'a". The position during the last seven years has not improved, despite the appearance of works which throw light on certain aspects of Shi'ism.<sup>7</sup>

The publication of the late Professor A. J. Wensinck's *The Muslim Creed* (Cambridge, 1932) marked an epoch, and after its appearance it was generally felt that having performed the task in a masterly fashion, he had clearly indicated a new approach to the problem, and indeed pointed the way to another

aspect of study –the examination of the Shi'ite creed.

Professor Wensinck had restricted himself to the early Sunnite authorities, and while studying his lucid and methodical presentation of the subject, we see that the picture is incomplete and can only be completed by editing and translating a number of Shi'ite creeds, thus paving the way for a historical and systematic study of the subject.

The creed of Islam cannot be understood by the study of the “Sunnite” element only; to this must also be added the inquiry into the Shi'ite counterpart. The uses of such a study are many, but three different aspects may here be stressed: such a study would clarify many historical questions; it would give us an insight into theological controversies – as these are not always barren, fanatical and personal, but indicative of general trends of thought; and finally, it would tend to the solution of the problem of legal distinctions that puzzle some of the foremost jurists.<sup>8</sup>

Our knowledge regarding the Shi'ite faith is generally derived from three well-known heresiologists whose published work is easily accessible. These in chronological order are: Baghdadi (died 429/1038),<sup>9</sup> Ibn Hazm (died 456/1054)<sup>10</sup> and Shahrastani (died 548/1153)<sup>11</sup>. Of these, Shahrastani is the best known, for it was published early; later, Ibn Hazm in the rendering of Friedlaender, came also to be fairly well known; the earliest authority, Baghdadi, is for various reasons the least known. All of these are devout Sunnis, convinced of the pernicious errors of the *rawafid*, the Shi'a.

With such an attitude, it is impossible for them to be just or fair to the Shi'ite point of view. One may as well expect a sober account of the Church of England from a Catholic priest. The result is that the earlier orientalist believed that Shi'ism was a pernicious corruption of Islam, concocted mainly, if not solely, for political reasons<sup>12</sup>; also that the Sunni faith is the “orthodox” faith and the Shi'ite, the “heterodox” one.

Whether Shi'ism was a deliberate corruption of Islam or whether it was one of its early forms is now hardly a debatable question. All the evidence which has come to light in recent years goes against the corruption theory; it is a form of Islam of interest from various points of view and it should be studied in its historical setting principally through Shi'ite sources, in comparison with all the other material available. Sunnite scholars of the olden days had neither the knowledge nor the will to give a purely objective account of the Shi'a faith, this is a factor which must impel one to go to the Shi'ite originals themselves.

As to “orthodoxy”, a minority, however small, may well have retained a very close touch with the original tradition; the majority, however preponderant, may conceivably have lost it in the stress of political conflicts. While it is not at all easy to determine how much weight is to be given to the plausible doctrine of the Shi'a that 'Ali, by virtue of his relationship and affinity to the Prophet, had a better insight into religion than others.

It is also not possible to dismiss contemptuously the possibility of the personal religious tradition of the Prophet, at least in some important matters, being carefully handed down to the Imams of the House of the Prophet, the people who undoubtedly had the best opportunity of knowing the true interpretation of

many a principle of Islam,<sup>13</sup> Hence a historical, objective, critical and comparative study of the Shi'ite sources is greatly to be desired.

In order to obtain an insight into the Shi'ite religion in general, we must first of all look at their creed. For this purpose we must go to their own authorities and find that we have only two sources available to us. The first is *al-Babu'l-Hadi 'Ashar* by Hasan bin Yusuf bin 'Ali bin al-Mutahhar al-Hilli, known as 'Allama Hilli (died 726/1326). The original text, together with its commentary *an-Nafi' Yawmi'l-Hashr* by Miqdad-i-Fadil al-Hilli (eighth century A.H.) was translated by W. M. Miller, and published by the Royal Asiatic Society, London, in 1928.

This little treatise is a very popular creed and has practically superseded every other in modern times. The second creed, of which a brief summary is before us, is the *Aqa'idu 'sh Shi'a* by 'Ali Asghar bin 'Ali Akbar, composed in the middle of the 19th century A.D. This is a book of 438 pages and Professor F. G. Browne gives an admirable summary in his *Persian Literature in Modern Times* (381 – 402).

He says: "Such an outline is the Shi'a creed of contemporary Persia in its crudest and most popular form. It would be interesting to trace the evolution of that creed from the earliest times of Islam, to compare (so far as the available material allow) the historical with the legendary Imams, and to contrast in detail the beliefs, both doctrinal and eschatological, of the Shi'a and the Sunnis" (p. 402).

These appear to be the only Shiite creeds studied in their entirety, but much valuable material may also be found in works like Nawbakhti's *Firaqu 'sh-Shi'a* and *The Shi'ite Religion* by D.M. Donaldson (London, 1933). In chapters xxix, xxx and xxxi he has given interesting quotations from Majlisi's *Hayatu'l-Qulub*. Thus it will be apparent that a systematic rendering of Ibn Babawayhi's creed constitutes a great advance on our present knowledge.

He was one of the greatest Shaykhs of the Shi'a – the author of one of the FOUR BOOKS – and having died in 381/991, he preceded by about 350 years 'Allama-I-Hilli whose *al-Babu'l-Hadi 'Ashar* is now a recognized classic. It is one of the earliest Ithna 'Ashari creeds and therefore of great value for the study of the historical evolution of the Shi'ite creed.

For the purposes of my translation I have used two printed editions, the Najaf and the Delhi editions, and consulted the Tehran edition. The Najaf edition is on the whole the most correct, although the Delhi edition gives many interesting additions and corrections in the later part. The Delhi edition is accompanied by an Urdu rendering, which despite some errors, is fairly useful; but the most admirable feature is the translator's notes. He has apparently made good use of the *Tashihu'l-'Itiqadat* of Shaykh Mufid, which was printed in the periodical *al-Murshid*, Baghdad, and a MS. copy whereof exists in the Asafiya Library, Hyderabad.

I regret I have not been able to study this work in its entirety, although the authorities of the Rampur State Library were kind enough to allow me the loan of those parts of *al-Murshid* which are preserved in their library, but which unhappily contain a part only of the text of *Tashih*.

It was my intention originally to add a systematic introduction to this translation, giving a comparative and historical account of the Shi'ite creed. A deeper study of the subject, however, has made me realize my own limitations and instilled diffidence. It appears to me that there are numerous works, at present not available to me, which must be carefully studied and analyzed before such a task can profitably be undertaken.

The only thing I have been able to do is to add a certain number of notes for facilitating a comparative study. *The Muslim Creed* was quite adequate for the Sunni doctrine; but for Shi'ite dogmas, apart from *al-Babu'l-Hadi Ashar*, no other creed was available.

Between the alternatives of giving no references at all, or of drawing attention to some of the salient points from such doctrinal works of Isma'ilism as *Kaidmi Pir* and *The Fatimid Creed* both by W. Ivanow, I have chosen the latter course, in the hope that it may help the comparative study of Shi'ite dogma. References to Ibnu'l-'Arabi's doctrine have been added as they form the basis of many Sufi and mystical works.

---

1. "The Heterodoxies of the Shiites in the presentation of Ibn Hazm," JAOS, vol. 28, pp. 1-80; and a commentary, vol. 29, pp. 1-183.

2. JAOS, 28, 3.

3. *ibid.*, 4.

4. Pers. Lit., iv. 402.

5. *ibid.*, 418.

6. EI, iv. 350 at 357.

7. For example, *Die Zwölfer Schi'a* by R. Strothmann, Leipzig, 1926; *al-Babu 'l-Hadi Ashar*, tr. W.M. Miller, R.A.S., London, 1928; Hasan b. Musa an-Nawbakhti, *Firaqu'sh-Shi'a*, ed. H. Ritter, Istanbul, 1931; *The Shiite Religion* by D.M. Donaldson, London, 1933, to mention some of them. The best general accounts of the Shiite faith are to be found in E.G. Browne, Pers. Lit., iv. 354 sqq. and R. Strothmann, *Enc. of Islam*, iv. 350-358, s.v. Shi'a.

8. In this connection an eminent authority on Muslim Law in India, F. B. Tyabji, has made the interesting suggestion that the difference between the Shiite and Sunnite law of inheritance can only be explained on the hypothesis that the Shiite interpretation came from the Prophet himself through 'Ali, and was not, as is too often assumed, the creation of later minds (*Aryan Path* for Feb. 1940, pp. 69-70).

9. Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*, ed. Md. Badr, Cairo, 1910; trans. in *Moslem Schisms and Sects*, Pt. I, by K.C. Seelye, Columbia University Press, 1920; Pt. II, by A.S. Halkin, Tel-Aviv, 1935; a *Mukhtasar* by 'Abd ar-Raziq ar-Ras'ani was ed. by P. Hitti, Cairo, 1924.

10. Israel Friedlaender, *op. cit.* The second volume contains a commentary and very valuable materials for the study of Shi'ism.

11. Shahrastani, *al-Milal wa'n-Nihal*, ed. Cureton, London, 1846; reprint, Leipzig, 1923.

12. Isr. Friedlaender, JAOS, 28, 2.

13. W. Ivanow has made some pertinent observations on the question of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in *JBBRAS* for 1940, 52.

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.al-islam.org/a-shiite-creed-shaykh-saduq/introduction>