

Home > History of Shi'ism: From the Advent of Islam up to the End of Minor Occultation > Part 7: The Intellectual Legacy of the Shi'ah > Lesson 26: The Science of Scholastic Theology {*ilm al-kalam*} > Lesson 26: Questions

Lesson 26: The Science of Scholastic Theology {*ilm al-kalam*}

The science of scholastic theology {*ilm al-kalam*} is the science about the totality of doctrines that every Muslim must believe. In other words, it is the science that deals with the discussion and study of the principles of religion {*usul ad-din*}.

The first difference in the principles of religion over the issue of Imamate {*imamah*} emerged immediately after the demise of the Holy Prophet (S). Shahrastani says, “The most significant difference in Islam is the difference over the Imamate, and over none of the other principles of religion was swords unsheathed.”¹

Nawbakhti also says:

The Messenger of Allah (S) passed away in Rabi' al-Awwal² ten years after the migration {*hijrah*} at the age of 63 and with 23 years of apostolic mission... At the time, the *ummah* of Islam was divided into three groups: A group was called “Shi'ah” which was composed of the followers {*shi'ah*} of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib ('a) from which all the Shi'ah subgroups separated. The second group claiming leadership and rule were the “*Ansar*” and the third group was inclined toward Abu Bakr ibn Abi Quhafah, saying: “The Holy Prophet (S) did not specified a certain person as the successor, and left the decision for it to the *ummah*.”³

As such, there have always been discussions and debates between the Shi'ah and other Muslims over the issue of Imamate.

Yet, the difference on other principles and fundamentals of the religion emerged during the latter part of the first century and early second century AH.

As Shahrastani says:

Difference on the principles emerged during the last days of the *sahabah* such as Ma'bad Jahanni,

Ghilan Damishqi and Yunus Aswari regarding predestination {*qadr*}, the relationship of good {*khayr*} and evil {*sharr*} to predestination. Wasil ibn 'Ata', a student of Hasan al-Basri and 'Amru ibn 'Ubayd, had added things to the questions of predestination.⁴

Among the scholastic {*kalami*} sects during those periods were the Wa'idiyyah, Khawarij, Murji'ah, and Jabariyyah.

Of course, the scholastic discussion had reached its optimal point when Wasil ibn 'Ata' separated from the assembly of Hasan al-Basri and founded the Mu'tazilah sect.⁵ In this manner, the Mu'tazilah school, based mainly on rational deductions, was against the Ahl al-Hadith which was called "Hashawiyyah".

It was so until such time that at the end of the third century AH, Abu'l-Hasan al-Ash'ari separated from the Mu'tazilah school and engaged in defending the Ahl al-Hadith school of thought within rational frameworks, and his school became known later as the Ash'ari school.⁶ After that, the Mu'tazilah made no progress, and kept on withdrawing in face of the Ahl al-Hadith so much so that now, the official scholastic theology of the Ahl as-Sunnah is the Ash'ari scholasticism.

The Shi'ah scholastic theology is the oldest of all Muslim scholastic schools. 'Ali ('a), the first infallible Imam acknowledged by the Shi'ah has discussed the questions on beliefs such as monotheism {*tawhid*}, predestination and freewill, and Attributes of God, and this kind of discussions has been recorded in *Nahj al-Balaghah* in the language of the Imam himself.

The scholastic discussions about Imamate among the Shi'ah, however, commenced immediately after the demise of the Holy Prophet (S) in defending the right of the Commander of the Faithful ('a) (over the issue of Imamate and caliphate). As narrated by Shaykh as-Saduq, the first to defend the right of 'Ali ('a) vis-à-vis the architects of Saqifah were twelve persons from among the great companions of the Prophet (S).

Few days after the event of Saqifah, they debated with Abu Bakr at the Mosque of the Prophet (S) and cornered him.⁷ After them, a person such as Abu Dharr al-Ghiffari had also not remained silent vis-à-vis the usurpers of the right of the Commander of the Faithful ('a) to such an extent that 'Uthman ibn al-'Affan was finally convinced to banish him to Sham and Rabdhah.

'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas, the Prophet's ('a) cousin, a student of 'Ali ('a), exegete {*mufassir*} of the Qur'an, scholar, and an outstanding Hashimite statesman, was one of the defenders of the Shi'ah school and always championing the rightfulness of 'Ali ('a) to such an extent that 'Umar ibn al-Khattab found fault with him for always saying, "Our right has been usurped."

Ibn al-'Abbas became blind in his old age and one day he heard some people in a certain place uttering abusive language against the Commander of the Faithful ('a). He said to his son 'Ali: "Hold my hand and take me there." When he was near them, he addressed them, saying: "Which of you was abusing God?!" They replied, "None." He asked, "Which is you was abusing the Prophet?" "None," they

answered.

He inquired, "Which of you was abusing 'Ali?" This time they responded, "All of us." He said, "Bear witness that I heard the Messenger of Allah (S) saying: "He who abuses 'Ali abuses me, and he who abuses me abuses God, and he who abuses God shall be thrown in an inverted position by God to the hellfire." He then returned and while walking, he asked his son, "How do you see them?" His son recited this poem:

نظروا اليك باعين محمّره نظر التيوس الى شفار الجازر

They are looking at you with a 'reddish look' like the gaze of the animal to be slaughtered to the lancet of the slaughterer.

Ibn al-'Abbas said, "You continue." His son said:

خزر الحواجب ناكسي اذقانهم نظر الدليل إلى العزيز القادر

They were humiliated and disgraced; they are looking at you like that of the subject to his master.

Ibn al-'Abbas said, "You continue!" His son answered, "I can say nothing more." Ibn al-'Abbas himself recited this poem:

احياؤهم خزي على أمواتهم و الميتون فضيحة للغابر

*Their living ones are the source of abjectness for their dead ones while their dead ones were the source of disgrace for their ancestors.*⁸

Among the companions of the Commander of the Faithful ('a), prominent figures such as Sa'sa'ah ibn Sawhan, Maytham at-Tammar, Kumayl ibn Ziyad, Awis Qarni, Salim ibn Qays, Harith Hamdani, and Asbagh ibn Nabatah also engaged in defending the right of 'Ali ('a), debating with the enemies of the Imam in this regard.

Meanwhile, concerning the first person among the Shi'ah to have written a book about scholastic theology, Ibn Nadim and Ibn Shahr Ashub regard Isma'il ibn Maytham at-Tammar to be the first author on Shi'ah scholastic theology as he has written the books *Al-Imamah* and *Al-Istihqaq* on this subject.⁹ The late Sayyid Hasan Sadr, however, considers 'Isa ibn Rawdhah as the first Shi'ah writer on scholastic theology.¹⁰ Of course, the oldest existing book on Shi'ah *kalam* is the book *Al-Aydhah* of Fadhl ibn

Shadhan an-Nayshaburi (died 260 AH) who was among the companions of Imam al-Hadi and Imam al-‘Askari (‘a).

During the period of Imam as-Sadiq (‘a), this science, like other sciences, also flourished tremendously and a number of his students such as Hisham ibn Hakam, Hisham ibn Salim, Mu‘min Taq, Fadhal ibn Hasan, and Jabir ibn Yazid Ju‘fi, among others, excelled in this field writing many books and treatises in this regard. They had discussions and debates with the scholars of other schools.

Fadhli ibn Shadhan an-Nayshaburi has been among the most outstanding Shi‘ah scholastic theologians {*mutakallimun*}. He met Imam ar-Ridha, Imam al-Jawad and Imam al-Hadi (‘a), and has written many book on the subjects of *kalam*, beliefs and deviant schools of thought.¹¹

Hasan ibn Nawbakhti (died 310 AH) was one of the Shi‘ah *mutakallimun* and among his books is *Firq ash-Shi‘ah*.¹²

Lesson 26: Summary

Scholastic theology {*kalam*} deals with the discussion about the principles of religion {*usul ad-din*}. The first difference in religion was over the question of Imamate {*imamah*} which emerged immediately after the demise of the Prophet (S) and the event of Saqifah. But the difference on other principles and fundamentals is related to the end of the first century AH.

Scholastic {*kalami*} discussions reached their optimal point after the founding of the Mu‘tazilah school of thought.

The Shi‘ah *kalam* is the oldest Muslim scholastic school because the scholastic discussions about the Imamate started immediately after the demise of the Prophet (S) on account of defending the rightfulness of ‘Ali (‘a).

The first book on *kalam* among the Shi‘ah was written by ‘Isa ibn Rawdhah while the oldest existing book on *kalam* is *Al-Aydhah* of Fadhl ibn Shadhan.

The Shi‘ah *kalam* flourished much during the period of Imam as-Sadiq (‘a) and some of his companions excelled in it.

Lesson 26: Questions

1. The first difference among the Muslim has been over which principle?
2. When did the scholastic discussions among the Shi‘ah commence?
3. The first Shi‘ah book on *kalam* has been written by whom?

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1. Shahrastani, Kitab al-Milal wa'n-Nihal (Qum: Manshurat ash-Sharif ar-Radi, 1364 AHS), vol. 1, p. 30.
 2. What is more popular is that the Messenger of Allah (S) passed away on the 27th of the lunar month of Safar.
 3. Nawbakhti, Abi Muhammad al-Hasan ibn Musa. Firq ash-Shi'ah. Najaf: Al-Matba'ah al-Haydariyyah, 1355 AH/1936.
 4. Kitab al-Milal wa'n-Nihal, p. 35.
 5. Ibid., p. 500.
 6. Ibid., pp. 85-86.
 7. Shaykh as-Saduq, Al-Khisal (Qum: Manshurat Jami'ah al-Mudarrisin fi al-Hawzah al-'Ilmiyyah, 1403 AH), pp. 461-465.
 8. Sayyid 'Ali Khan ash-Shirazi, Ad-Darajat ar-Rafi'ah fi Tabaqat ash-Shi'ah (Qum: Manshurat Maktabah Basirati, n.d.), p. 127.
 9. Ibn Nadim, Al-Fihrist (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah Li't-Taba'ah wa'n-Nashr, n.d.), p. 249; Ibn Shahr Ashub Mazandarani, Ma'alim al-'Ulama' (Najaf: Manshurat al-Matba'ah al-Haydariyyah, 1380 AH/1961), p. 62.
 10. Sayyid Hasan Sadr, Ta'sis ash-Shi'ah Li 'Ulum al-Islam (Tehran: Manshurat al-A'lami, n.d.), p. 350.
 11. Abu'l-'Abbas Ahmad ibn 'Ali ibn Ahmad ibn al-'Abbas Najashi, Fihrist Asma' Musanfa ash-Shi'ah (Rijal Najashi) (Qum: Islamic Publications Office affiliated to the Society of Teachers of the Islamic Seminary in Qum, 1407 AH), p. 306.
 12. Ibid., p. 63.

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