

Great Shi'i Works: Al-Kafi' by Al-Kulayni

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A short biography of Shaykh Al-Kulayni, and a description of his great work Al-Kafi, one of the four principal books of Shi'i hadith.

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Great Shi'i Works: 'Al-Kafi' by Al-Kulayni

The Author

The author of *al-Kafi* was *thiqat al-Islam*, Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Ya'qub b. Ishaq al-Kulaini al-Razi. He died in 328 A.H. or 329 A.H. (939 or 940 A.D.). Very little is known of his life and there is some dispute as to whether the *nisba* by which he is known is al-Kulaini or al-Kulini. However, it is agreed that it refers to a village in Iran, Kulain or Kulin; both were villages there.¹

He first worked as a religious scholar and *faqih* (student of *fiqh* or religious law) among the Imami-Shi'i scholars of al-Raiy in Iran. Then he moved to Baghdad and became head of the religious and legal scholars of the Imamis during the time when al-Muqtadir was Caliph. Al-Kulaini's life's work took place during the time of the *sufara'* of the *Mahdi* (the agents who acted on behalf of the Hidden Imam during the lesser occultation, *al ghaiba al-sughra*).²

Al-Kulaini is accredited with several works during this period. Among these are, as well as *al-Kafi*, a *Kitab al-rijal*, (a book in which men are assessed as authorities for traditions), *al-Radd 'ala 'l-Qaramata* ("Refutation of the Carmatians", *Rasa' il al-a'immata* "Letters of the Imams" and an anthology of poetry about the Imams. Only *al-Kafi* appears to have survived.³

Al- Kafi

Al-Kafi is a collection of the traditions taught by the Prophet and the Imams and handed down to the Muslim Community by the disciples of the Imams. The name *al-Kafi* means "that which is sufficient" that is, the book was intended to be a comprehensive collection of Imami-Shi'i traditions. This is explained by al-Kulaini in his introduction to the work:

"...You wanted to have a book which would be sufficient (for your religious needs) (*kafin*), which would include all kinds of knowledge (*'ilm*) of religion, which would be adequate for the student, and to which the teacher might refer. Thus it could be used by anyone who wanted knowledge of religion and of legal practice (*'amal*) according to sound traditions (*athar*) from the truthful ones (the *Imams*) ..."

It is claimed that it took al-Kulaini twenty years to complete *al-Kafi*. It is indeed a very full and comprehensive work, divided into three sections, *al-usul*, *al-furu* and *al-rawda*.

The *usul* give traditions concerning the principles of religion and principles on which religious law is based. The *furu'* concern the traditions which elaborate the details of religious law, while the *rawda* is a collection of traditions outlining various points of religious interest and including some of the letters and speeches of the Imams.

One of the principal features of the work is that the traditions are presented systematically in chapters according to their subject matter. This is a system which Islamic scholars had begun to use in the second half of the second century and in the third century of the Islamic era. Al-Kulaini was not the first Imami scholar to use the method. There are other works of traditions which use the same method, notably *Kitab al-Mahasin* of Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Khalid al-Barqi (d. 274/887).⁴ However it seems to have been the first work to present such a comprehensive survey of Imami traditions in this manner.

The source collections of traditions were known as *usul*. These were collections of traditions, either heard directly from the Imam or at least at second hand. There were said to have been four hundred of such collections.⁵ These traditions were not arranged in chapters according to subject but arranged in the order in which the traditions were heard, regardless of subject matter or which particular Imam they were heard from.⁶ It was these *usul* as well as earlier edited collections which were the basis of al-Kulaini's collection as he heard them taught by earlier scholars. Unfortunately with the development of the comprehensive collections, the *usul* must have become less important, and only a few survive in manuscript.

Traditionists before al-Kulaini and traditionists after him examined the *isnads* (chain of authorities) with great care. Their purpose was to make sure that all reporters of a particular tradition were men of true faith; al-Kulaini himself seems to be less concerned with the *isnad* than with the *matn* or content of the tradition. Thus he sometimes reports traditions with men in the *isnad*, who were not strictly speaking disciples of the Imams; sometimes they belong to a different persuasion like the Zaidis, sometimes they are *ghulat*, extremists in their views. Some men in the *isnads* are those who regarded one of the earlier Imams as the final Imam and there are even men entirely unconnected with *Shi'i* views.⁷ The scholars of tradition elaborated a system of categorizing the different traditions according to the level of authenticity of a tradition, in terms of *isnad* and subject matter.

The number of traditions in *al-Kafi* is 15,181;⁸ according to another reckoning 15,176.⁹ If the traditions reported in different sections are counted, the number is over 1,000 more. Of the basic traditions, 5,072 are considered sound (*sahih*) by scholars, i.e. first category; 144 are regarded as good (*hasan*), second category; 178 are held to be trustworthy (*muwaththaq*), third category; 302 are adjudged to be strong (*qawi*), fourth category; and 9,484 are considered weak (*da'if*), fifth category.¹⁰ The fact that a tradition is considered weak does not mean that it is not true.

What it means is that the scholars of tradition have found some weakness in the tradition, usually one of the persons in the *isnad*, which suggests the possibility that the tradition might not go back to the Imam as claimed. The science developed by Islamic scholars of tradition in order to examine the *isnads* and subject matter of traditions is a very specialised study; it involves, in particular, *'ilm al-rijal*, the study of the backgrounds of individual traditionists who have handed on the tradition.

The *usul* of *al-Kafi* are divided into eight *kutub* or chapters and most of the *kutub* are divided into *abwab* or sections. The eight *kutub* are.

1. *Kitab al-'aql wa-'l'jahl*, "The Chapter of Reason and Ignorance". This chapter presents the theological distinction between reason and ignorance.

2. *Kitab fadl al-'ilm*, "The Chapter of the Excellence of Knowledge". In this chapter knowledge (*'ilm*) is dealt with on the basis of its basic early Islamic meaning of the traditional knowledge of Islam, i.e. knowledge of religion that has been passed on and inherited. In the course of this chapter, sections deal with the methods of approaching Islamic traditional knowledge; the methods of judging the truth of the subject matter of traditions, a description of traditions from the Imams and arguments against the use of personal opinion (*ra'y*) and analogy (*qiyas*).

3. *Kitab al-tawhid*, "The Chapter of Unity". This, as its name suggests, deals with the theology of God.

4. *Kitab al-hujja*, "The Chapter of the Proof". This deals with the need for man and the world to have "a proof". That "proof" is the Imams, and before them it was the prophets. It also includes an historical section on the Imams.

5. *Kitab al-Iman wa-'l-kufr*, "The Chapter of Faith and Unbelief". This is a comprehensive survey of the elements of faith (*iman*) and unbelief (*kufr*). It includes such important topics as "the pillars of Islam", and it also deals with the difference between faith (*iman*) and submission to God (*Islam*).

6. *Kitab al-du'a'*, "The Chapter of Prayer". This does not concern the statutory *salat* which is also translated "prayer". This chapter deals with personal prayers (*du'a'*) as distinct from the *salat* which is performed in a prescribed manner at prescribed times. It records prayers recommended by the Imams for a variety of situations and occasions.

7. *Kitab al-fadl al-Qur'an*, "The Chapter of the Excellence of the Qur'an". The title of the chapter shows that it concerns the advantages that accrue to the believer who recites the Qur'an, as well as advising on the methods of recitation.

8. *Kitab al-'ishra*, "The Chapter of Companionship". At first sight it seems rather surprising to find such a chapter included in the *usul* or principles of religion. The main concern of the other chapters has been man's relationship with God. This chapter emphasizes that that relationship with God also encompasses man's relationship with his fellow men.

The *furu'* of *al-kafi* are concerned with the elaboration of the details of Islamic law. Islamic law, as is well known, concerns the whole man and his conduct towards God is as much a matter of Islamic law as his conduct towards his fellow men. The *furu'* contain many more traditions than the *usul* and there are 26 *kutub*. It opens in the traditional Islamic manner with the *Kitab al-tahara*, "The Chapter of Purity", which concerns the ritual purification that is necessary before prayer (*salat*) and when the state of ritual purity is broken.

The next book *Kitab al-haid*, "The Chapter of Menstruation" concerns one of the important states in

which ritual purity is broken, that of menstruation. The third book also concerns a state which breaks ritual purity, that of death and *Kitab al-jana'iz*, "The Chapter of Funerals" deals with funerals and other matters concerned with burial rites. The *Kitab al-salat*, "The Chapter of Prayer" outlines the rules for ritual prayer, and also gives details of supererogatory prayer.

Following *Kitab al-salat* is another pillar of Islam, the alms tax (*al-Zakat*) paid as a Muslim. After this comes the *Kitab al-siyam*, "The Chapter of Fasting". Here the rules of the prescribed fast of Ramadan are outlined as well as those of voluntary fasts, and fasts performed as an act of expiation. *Kitab al-Hajj*, "The Chapter of the Pilgrimage" gives the rules of that great Islamic rite. Al-Kulaini also includes in this chapter a section on visiting the tombs of the Prophet and the Imams (*al-Ziarat*).

The next chapter *Kitab al-jihad* presents traditions on the regulations for holy warfare. It is followed by *Kitab al-ma'isha* which concerns the manner of earning one's living. All sorts of trading problems are treated in this chapter. Marriage (*nikah*) is the subject of the next book. There are numerous details including a very detailed section on *mut'a* or temporary marriage. Marriage is naturally followed by the birth of children and the next book deals with what is necessary and what is recommended at that time.

Although it deals with a variety of matters concerned with the birth and bringing up of children, it is called *Kitab al-'aqiqa*. *Aqiqa* is actually a sacrifice performed on behalf of a seven-day old child. The hair of the child is cut off and its weight in silver given as *sadaqa* "charity". The Prophet performed this sacrifice on behalf of al-Hasan and al-Husain and Fatima gave away the *sadaqa*. After marriage and children, the next subject is that of divorce (*al-talaq*). The different laws concerning divorce are detailed in traditions from the Prophet and the Imams.

Then the different kinds of slaves and the different methods of freeing them are discussed in *kitab al-'itq wa'-l-tadbir wa'-l-katiba*. The next two chapters concern hunting (*said*) and ritual slaughter (*dhaba'ih*). There follow three chapters on daily living: one is concerned with foods (*at'ima*) another drinks (*ashriba*), and the third with clothes, ornaments and courteousness (*al-ziq wa'-l-tajammul wa'-l-muru'a*). After this comes a chapter on domestic animals (*dawajin*). Two chapters deal with inheritance. The first entitled *al-wasaya* deals with bequests while the second *al-mawarith* outlines the ordinary laws of inheritance.

The remaining chapters all concern the administration of the law. *Kitab al-hudud* outlines the circumstances and the manner in which punishments, which have the authority of the Qur'an, and the Prophet should be administered, while *al-diyat* concerns the laws of blood vengeance and details the compensation that must be given if someone harms another physically. *Kitab al-shahadat* concerns the requirements for testimony in legal cases, and *Kitab al-qada' wa'-l-ahkam* outlines the code of behaviour incumbent upon judges and what type of people they should be. The *furu* closes with a discussion of oaths, vows and the manner of atonement when the former two are broken in *Kitab al-aiman wa'-l-nudhur wa'-l-kaffarat*.

In the *rawda* of *al-Kafi*, al-Kulaini does not follow the systematic method he had used in the *usul* and the

furū'. The traditions follow one another in what appears to be a fairly inconsistent order. It certainly lacks the detailed systematic approach that is so obviously present in the other two parts of the book.

In presenting the traditions in *al-Kafi*, al-Kulaini's main approach seems to have been to let the traditions speak for themselves. He intervenes very little himself. Sometimes he thinks it necessary to explain some discrepancy or apparent inconsistency, but these occasions are very rare. His main contribution to the task has been the massive work of collecting and editing.

The importance of *al-Kafi* as a work of tradition is considerable. It is regarded as one of the four major works of *Shi'i* traditions. This has led to considerable number of commentaries being written about it by later writers.

The most important of these is *Mir'at al-'uqul fi sharh akhbar al al-rasul* by al-Majlisi (d. 1110/1698). Other commentators include Mulla Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi (d. 1050/1640), al-Mazandarani (d. 1080/1699), al-Qazwini (d. 1089/1678) and Muhammad Baqir b. Damad (d. 1040/1630). All these commentaries have been published, though most of them nearly a hundred years ago. In addition to these commentaries, there are numerous others, many of which have also been published.¹¹

The great value of *al-Kafi* to Shi'i Muslims is emphasized by the number of outstanding scholars of their community who have considered it worthwhile to write commentaries on the work. *Al-Kafi* represents a decisive moment in the collection of traditions from the Prophet and the Imams and their systematic presentation.

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1. Cf. 'Ali Akbar al-Ghaffari's introduction to his eight volume edition of al-Kulaini's *al-Kafi* Teheran, 3rd edition 1388-, I, 9-13.
 2. Ibid. I 13-14.
 3. Ibid. I 14.
 4. Ibid. I 23-24 citing page 8 of al-Kulaini's text.
 5. This work has been edited in two volumes by Jalal al-Din al-Husaini and published in Teheran, 1370 A.H.
 6. On the Usul, see Agha Buzurg al-Tihriani al-Dhari'a ila tasanif al-Shi'a (Najaf and Teheran, 1963-), II, 125-129.
 7. Hashim Ma'ruf al-Hasani Dirasat fi 'l-Kafi wa'l-Sahih (Sur 1968) 137-8
 8. Based on a count of the various categories of Traditions given by Agha Buzurg al-Tihriani op.cit. XVII 245.
 9. This number is given by Ali Akbar al-Ghaffari in his introduction to *al-Kafi*, I, 28 footnote 3.
 10. Agha Buzurg al-Tihriani, op.cit., XVII, 245.
 11. F. Sezgin, Geshichte des arabischen Schrifttums (Leiden 1967-), I, 541-2.

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